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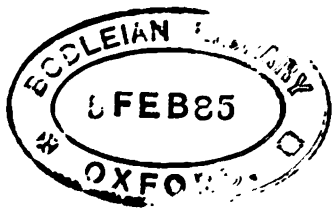
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Stories of the Past.

WILD JACK.

POLL MILES.

WILD JACK.

Part I.

CHAPTER I.

A SERIES of accidents had overtaken the Newbury mail from the hour that it started in the fine dewy morning, till the sun went down; and as the twilight deepened over the landscape it was still many miles from its destination.

The troubles began early in the day. One of the leaders cast a shoe, and had to be shod at the first village through which they passed. Farther on something went wrong with the harness, and later still a much more serious impediment to their progress arose—some accident happened to a wheel, so that the coach must needs go half-pace, in spite of the oaths of old Joe, the driver, whose boast it was that he had never reached Wancote later than midnight.

But this evening old Joe's boasts were doomed to fall to the ground, for the coach could only crawl along, and the night was closing in fast.

The guard was engaged in a somewhat mysterious

occupation—an occupation which, though only partially visible from the interior of the coach, caused a faint shriek to issue therefrom.

"What is he doing? What is it?" cried a woman's voice.

"Nothing, madam; be easy, I entreat," was the answer from within. "There is nothing to alarm, but rather to reassure, in his actions—he prepares his pistols, and looks to their priming. Zounds! one must be ready for all contingencies with ten miles of unfrequented road ahead of us."

The mail continued on its way, becoming slower and slower, as an ominous creaking of the injured wheel gave token that the pace must be reduced to a walk.

The curtain before the window was held back, and a gentleman from within addressed the guard.

"Will the wheel hold out, think you?" he said.

"It is impossible to assure your reverence that it will, and the night will be dark."

The gentleman drew in his head with a little "Tut-tut" of consternation.

There were four occupants of the coach—two ladies and two gentlemen. Of the ladies one was young, perhaps nineteen, and one close upon forty. The younger was the parson's daughter Elizabeth, otherwise Betty Ives. Her father, Mr. Ives, was bringing her home from Newbury, where she had spent the last six months with her aunt, Mrs. Primrose, seeing something of the gay world in the county town.

The father and daughter, who sat opposite to each other, bore a strong resemblance to each other. In the girl's face the dark brows were more arched, the large blue eyes more tender, the firm mouth more sweet, and all tinted with the lilies and roses of a fresh country life, so beautifully blended on the peach like cheeks that even without her rare perfection of feature, the colouring alone would have made Betty beautiful.

Parson Ives had been very handsome in his youth, and though worn by years (he was forty years older than his child), and by the grief of bereavement, he was yet famous for his good looks.

Betty wore a short dark green riding-habit and a broad felt hat. She was as much at home on horseback as on foot, and seldom in the mornings wore a less business-like costume.

The other two occupants of the coach were to ordinary eyes less interesting. Mistress Mary Jones was a faded woman, who had once been pretty, a spinster, a great friend of Betty's, and one of her father's parishioners. She was an excellent woman in her way, albeit somewhat given to terrors, both real and fanciful.

Her opposite neighbour was a man past the prime of life, owner and breeder of large herds of cattle near Wancote, a man who, after attending the Newbury markets, often returned home by this very coach, and was believed to carry large sums of money in the flap-pockets of his many-caped riding-coat.

Mr. Barnes had a fixed mask-like countenance,

his bushy eyebrows almost met in a wrinkle that told of thought and deep calculation. He was clean-shaven, and his chin was swathed in a huge neck-cloth of white muslin; he wore his hat low on his brow.

"I like not to be out so late on the high road," said he very suddenly, so that both Mr. Ives and Mistress Mary Jones started, and Betty, whom nothing ever startled, turned her great blue eyes inquiringly on him.

"Why, sir?" she asked.

"Why, my good young lady, because the Newbury sales are just over, and it is well known that the stock reared on Belford home farm has sold well."

"Are the roads not safe then, sir?" asked Mr. Ives rather anxiously.

"I do not quite say that, for it is many a long day since the coach was attacked between Newbury and Wancote; but rumour has been busy."

"Ha!" cried Betty, sitting upright eagerly.

"It is said that Wild Jack Barnstaple has been heard of in the neighbourhood."

"Heaven help us!" shrieked Mary Jones.

"Be calm, I entreat you, my dear madam, and have pity on my unfortunate toes! Zounds! it is torture enough to be subject to periodical gout, without such an infliction as the stamp of a lady's fashionable heel on the tender place."

"But you say Wild Jack is in the neighbourhood! Oh Heaven! what will become of us!"

Betty's blooming cheek had turned just a faint

shade paler, but the rosy colour came rushing back, her eyes flashed.

Suddenly stooping forward she said in a low voice:

"Mr. Barnes, you may confide in me. Do you carry much money?"

He answered in a tone of assumed ease, "Paper to the value of nearly a thousand pounds."

"Then look you, Mr. Barnes," said Betty in her natural voice, "I have a proposal to make to you. Give the valuables you have to us—to Miss Mary Jones and to myself. Wild Jack, all say, is a gentleman—should he, by any unfortunate chance, be on the road to-night, he will not rob women. Your money will be safe."

"No, no, no, no!" cried Mary. "Betty, how can you propose anything so impossible, so unfeminine! Are not men our natural protectors?" and she threw a languishing glance at the cattle-breeder. "Shall we usurp their rights?"

"It is quite true; it is impossible," said Barnes.

"You are foolish to throw away the chance," said Betty calmly.

"I cannot see why you should not accept her offer," said the parson restlessly; he was accustomed to yield to his daughter's judgment in everything. "Betty is a bold girl, and she is generally in the right."

"Come, yield the point, Mr. Barnes," said Betty with a light laugh, holding out her hand for the pocket-book.

"Remember I have no part or parcel in it," cried Mary, shrinking farther and farther away. "I would not for the whole world: Why, Betty," she whimpered, "they might even search you."

"Wild Jack is a gentleman," answered the girl; then with a sudden flash of scorn, "but even had I not such faith in his honourable dealing, I should know how to take care of myself. Give me the papers, Mr. Barnes."

Very unwillingly, as if he despised himself for so doing, Barnes gave them into her hands. The notes were smoothed, and laid flat; they occupied the smallest space possible.

Betty Ives placed the papers within the bosom of her tight-fitting riding-habit, and leant back, as if she had done with the subject.

Mr. Ives looked with anxious eyes through the window.

The mail was passing along a wide, fair, unsheltered road; on each side spread away treeless tracts of country, flat and wide, over which the fresh, cold wind blew listlessly. To the left the horizon was bounded by the wide expanse of the grassy Berkshire downs. They rose and fell, a vast, undulating plain, covered with short, fine herbage.

It was growing very dark. The parson drew in his head, and thanked heaven that the country was so fine and open, that he could, even in the gathering gloom, see far behind and before, and could perceive no suspicious object.

"We are all right here," said Mr. Barnes, his voice

becoming more and more dismal. "But a mile farther on, and we come to a small wood - the road dips down there suddenly; it is a first-rate place for an ambush."

"Mercy! mercy!" cried Mary Jones, in a voice half-strangled by the anguish of her terror.

"We have yet a mile of safety," said Betty, kindly —"a whole mile, Mary; and, going at this pace, we need not prepare our terrors for another hour."

"Heaven grant that the moon may be up!" cried Barnes.

"Sir," said Betty, slowly, "I imagine that you carry arms."

"I am not unarmed," he answered hastily, "I have pistols and a sword."

"I should have them in readiness, as I myself intend to do," said Betty; and she drew out a tiny silver-mounted pistol. "See, it is prepared for use. My father is a clergyman, and must eschew fire-arms; Mary Jones is a woman——"

"Aye, a true woman, a frail woman," whined the poor lady.

"But," continued Betty, "the guard is armed, so are we; we have still a mile to go. Ha!"—her voice ended abruptly. There was a crashing sound, a shot, a shout, a confused sense as if the whole coach were falling to the ground. The door was torn open. Before Betty could even raise the deadly little weapon she carried it was seized from her hand, the whole party were dragged out of the carriage; they found themselves surrounded by armed men. There was a

violent struggle, fighting and disorder, loud oaths from the coachman, appalling shrieks from Mary Jones. Some one opened a lantern, and allowed its red glare to fall on the scared prisoners and on the black masks of their captors.

The man who was evidently the leader of the party was holding Betty's two hands in one of his in a grasp which she imagined to be gentle until she attempted to release them, when she discovered that she might as easily have broken bands of steel.

"Here, give me a rope; we must bind our prisoners," said this man suddenly. "This fair lady had all but fired one shot too many for Wild Jack to-night!"

There was a laugh, and with dexterity, evidently gained from experience, the prisoners were rapidly bound.

"I am grieved to incommode you thus, madam," said the leader, bowing low to Betty; "our business is with that gentleman," with a slight motion of his hand towards the hapless Mr. Barnes.

Betty bowed slightly. The light fell full on her tall figure, on her noble head slightly raised and thrown back; the nostrils dilated, the colour glowing richly in the soft cheek. Wild Jack, looking at her, felt a glow of enthusiasm which betrayed itself in his voice.

"You have nothing to fear, madam," he said.

"I? I fear nothing," said the girl calmly; "Wild Jack is a gentleman."

The highwayman made a rapid sign to his comrades, who proceeded to throw themselves on to

Samuel Barnes, and begin to search him from head to foot.

A sudden fear flashed into Betty's mind. How if Wild Jack were unable to restrain his companions, infuriated as they would be by their failure in discovering the expected treasure on the person of their victim?

Her cheeks paled; for one moment she turned her eyes full on the masked face of her captor. Masked as he was, her look thrilled him through and through.

"You are safe," he repeated hurriedly.

Something in his voice seemed to give her confidence, for she stooped forward, and said in a low voice, "Mr. Barnstaple, I trust to your honour; the money is here." And with a grand movement she laid her bound hands on her breast.

Wild Jack bowed low, but he said nothing; and, in spite of the bold front she bore, Betty's heart beat fast.

The noise increased. Samuel Barnes, maddened with fright, struggled against his assailants furiously, but he was overmatched; a violent blow with the butt end of a pistol stunned him completely, and all resistance was over. Undaunted by their want of success, the coach was then rifled, the mails ruthlessly thrown out into the road.

One or two of the men, of whom there appeared to be five at least, now proposed to search the women.

There was a moment's pause, during which Wild Jack tightened his grasp on Betty's arm. Had she shown one symptom of fear, it is possible that his

fierce profession would have triumphed over the infatuation of her beauty, but the look she turned upon him was so full of confidence, such absolute trust in his honour, that it prevailed.

He swore that he made no war upon women, and ordered back his disappointed followers, allowing them to divide the trumpery booty they had secured, of watches, trinkets and the parson's purse, which was not empty.

They stood back. Wild Jack spoke to them in a low tone, looking, as he did so, several times up at the sky as if to see how the time went; then advancing he opened the door of the coach, and unbinding the hands of the two ladies, offered to hand them in.

Betty demurred. "We have duties here first," she said, pointing to the inanimate form of poor Samuel Barnes.

"It is well then," said Wild Jack, just touching the prostrate man with the toe of his boot. "We will leave you now, with many apologies, madam, for our intrusion."

The others were already in the saddle and almost out of sight.

Wild Jack, who was about to mount, withdrew his foot from the stirrup and approached Betty once more.

"Go, go!" she said. "This poor man bleeds; ah, why do you not go?"

"I am gone," he answered. "But first, fair lady, in consideration of the booty I have resigned I demand a reward."

"What can I give you?"

He pointed to her hand, on one finger of which was a small gold ring in the form of a serpent with tiny ruby eyes.

"Give me that," he said somewhat imperiously.

"You are welcome," she said haughtily, and she drew the ring from her finger. "I would give a trinket of more value," she cried, stamping her little foot, "to be freed from your company now!"

The words stung him.

"You will remember those words, madam," he said, "some day—when this ring returns to your keeping."

He shut the lantern, which during all this time had thrown its yellow light on the strange scene, mounted his horse and disappeared. The horse was snow white, and it passed by like a white gleam in the darkness.

It was pitch dark now, and the horror of their situation was increased by the moans which Mr. Barnes began to utter as consciousness slowly returned.

It was a relief to all when the familiar sound of flint and steel smote the ear, and the coachman awkwardly, with his bound hands, attempted to light the lamps of the coach. Betty's first business was to unfasten the ropes which bound the men hand and foot, and by degrees they were able to take in their exact position.

One of the leaders had been shot dead, the traces had been cut, but the frightened horses had not strayed out of reach.

Mary Jones was in a dead faint, and, in the absence of all restoratives, seemed likely to remain so.

Mr. Barnes, his head carefully bound up by Betty and her father, was at last able to rise to his feet and take his place in the carriage.

The dawn was already breaking, and a white light stealing over the murky sky, before the mail could once more get under weigh and move heavily forwards.

Far and wide the downs stretched, silent and deserted; a bitter wind swept over them and stirred the mane of the dead horse, who lay a ghastly spectacle, his head thrown back, in a pool of his own blood. From afar, from whence nor eye nor tongue could tell, came a foul raven croaking.

CHAPTER II.

THE village of Hendred, of which Mr. Ives was the parson, lay about two miles beyond Wancote, in a low valley nestling under a great wave of the downs. Behind the village a chalk cliff rose white and dazzling, and the warm red brick of the houses, the gleaming chalk, the bright tender green of the herbage, formed one of those sunny pictures of which Berkshire is full.

In the centre of the village rose the little church, with its square grey tower, over which grew a magnificent creeper with crimson leaves glowing with a wondrous richness of colour.

A stone's throw back from the road, in a high-walled garden, stood the Parsonage. The garden was rich with orchard trees and wall fruit, and boasted in particular one golden plum that was the parson's boast and pride. He had imported rich soil from the valleys, and in each corner of the garden gathered little hills of leaf-mould. Mr. Ives was a notable gardener.

Those who would see Betty Ives at her best should see her at home—at least, so said young Mr. Robins, the rich yeoman's son, who sighed in vain for her good graces. He was a domestic man, much given to superintending, himself, duties which were looked

upon as women's gear—" A womanish man," said the women.

On the other hand young Thornton, eldest son of Squire Thornton of Thornton Beeches, in the neighbourhood of Wancote, gave out that to see Mistress Betty at her best, was to see her in the hunting-field, for she rode like a bird, and was bright and ready as a pike-staff! There was a confusion of metaphor, but words always failed the young fellow when he spoke of the lady who had already three times refused to be his wife.

Then Dr. Glebe, the good doctor of Wancote, in a grey bag-wig and hunting-boots, would take a whole handful of snuff while he swore that Mistress Betty was only at her best by a sick-bed.

The parson laughed, and exclaimed with a tear in his eye, that such a woman as his daughter was always at her best in whatever she put her hand to do; and the old groom Isaac assented with a chuckle, vowing that his young lady was good all round.

The autumn was beginning, and the crimson creepers on church and wall were at the height of their glow. Betty Ives was strolling in the Parsonage garden gathering plums from the wall.

The garden-door was on the latch, it needed but to raise it, and Mistress Mary Jones walked in. Betty went eagerly forward to meet her with outstretched hands. No welcome could be more cordial than that which Betty Ives gave to her friends.

"I am so glad to see you, Mary! and are you well? Have you lost your headache?"

Miss Mary sank into a garden-seat and sighed, still retaining the hand of her friend.

"I am better, sweet Bet," she said; "but my nerves will not recover the shock for years! No, no! do not shake your head and smile; if you had the crawlings up the back that I experience, and the creepings down the spine, and the shaking of knees, the twittering of lips, and quiverings of the eyelids——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Betty. "Thank heaven, I am not tormented thus! My dear Mary, how can you survive such a multitude of ailments!"

"I have survived worse!" she answered, shuddering. "I survived the shock itself!"

"Were you very much frightened?" asked Betty in a tone of interest.

"Frightened! I was terrified. I have not nerve like yours. The dark, the shot! the dark faces, the loud voices, the . . . ah!"

Seeing Mary's chest beginning to heave, Betty thought it high time to change the subject. "We will not recall it," she said, hastily. "Let us think on more agreeable topics. My father rode into Wancote this morning, to stroll about the market place and hear the news."

"And why did you not go?"

"Because," answered Betty, "I have been making preserves the livelong day. Up at six this morning, for Dame Martha told me that, owing to my putting it off so long, the fruit was beginning to rot, so there was no time to lose."

"I leave preserving to my woman," said Mary. "The hanging over the fire is ruin to the finest skin."

"Yes, my face is scorched and heated," answered Betty, turning a cheek like a peach to her friend. "But after all, to so weather-beaten a maid as myself, up and out in all seasons, a scorched cheek, more or less, signifies not; and Dame Martha works hard."

"And had your father any news from Wancote?"

"Yes, news indeed—Belton has been taken!"

"Taken?"

"Hired or purchased by a gentleman of the name of Johnstone, whose arrival is expected hourly."

"This is news indeed! None but a rich man could have paid the price asked."

"His horses have arrived," went on Betty. "Only four of them as yet, but each one of the four of surpassing beauty. One of them, Mr. Barnes told my father, looked worth a king's ransom."

"May the owner be worthy of his cattle," said Mary Jones. "And were there no coach-horses, no carriages? No symptoms of a lady to dispense the hospitalities of Belton?"

"Mr. Johnstone is said to be unmarried," answered Betty gravely. "I am sorry for it, a new neighbour would have been an agreeable addition to our society."

There was a click of the garden gate, then a smart rap, as if by the knob of a hunting whip.

"Some one is at the gate," said Miss Mary with curiosity.

"Yes," answered Betty, "and I must needs answer

it myself, for the bell is broken, as doubtless our visitor has discovered, and he may knock till doomsday ere the sound reach the ears of Dame Martha or Isaac, both of whom are engaged in quarrelling in the kitchen. So so! how impatient it is!"

For another succession of knocks fell on the panel.

"I entreat you, do not open the door yourself, Betty," cried Mary in a tone of alarm. "Who knows who may be there?"

"Certainly not Wild Jack," answered Betty smiling, and disengaging herself from her friend's arm she went forward and opened the gate.

"Does Mr. Ives live here?" asked a loud clear voice, which, however, suddenly changed in tone when the opening door disclosed the radiant vision of the parson's lovely daughter.

A feathered hat was doffed, a gentleman sprang from his horse, and, bowing low, asked if he had the honour of addressing one of the family of Mr. Ives.

"His only daughter, sir," answered Betty courteously. "If you wish to see my father, I will beg you to come in and wait, as he will be in shortly." Mary Jones advanced, her eyes took in at a glance the whole distinguished appearance of the visitor, from the fine cut of his suit of claret-coloured cloth, to the well-shaped boot with shining spur, and she gave a little sigh of approval.

Betty summoned old Isaac and bade him take charge of the horse, and then led the way into the garden.

"We are primitive folk here," she said. "But I find most people prefer our garden-seats to entering the house."

Mary was somewhat scandalized, she thought these easy out-door seats a breach of etiquette in themselves, but she could make no remonstrance beyond a little tweak at her friend's sleeve.

Betty sat down, and inviting her visitor to do likewise, she said:

"In my character as mistress of the house, I would wish to introduce you, sir, to my friend, Mistress Mary Jones, of Elm Cottage, close by, but I have not the honour of being acquainted actually with your name, albeit I have conjectured."

"My name is John Johnstone, madam," he replied. "I have but now become the possessor of Belton, near Wancote."

"Our new neighbour," cried Mary.

"Yes, I claim that honour," continued Mr. Johnstone,

"We are vastly pleased to make your acquaintance," said Mary, thinking with some pride that she could boast to her friends of already knowing the new-comer.

Mr. Johnstone acknowledged the compliment courteously, but he never took his eyes off his young hostess, who appeared in them a miracle of grace and beauty.

With the skill of a man of the world, he drew her into animated conversation, gathering from her information respecting the country round, the different

meets of the hounds, the neighbours, the tradespeople, the horses. Time slipped away, almost unperceived, and neither lady knew how it had sped, when Mr. Ives, mounted on his handsome bay cob, rode up to the door.

Mr. Ives beheld with some surprise his daughter and her friend in full converse with a stranger.

The scene was worthy of a Watteau's brush—the sun just sinking behind the orchard trees, gilding the edge of each leaf, shone on the dark red of John Johnstone's dress, warmed the sombre hue of fair Betty's Lincoln green, and played on the blue and primrose of Mistress Mary's flower-like costume. It was a fair picture, and no eye could rest on a goodlier couple than the tall lithe young man, and the noble maiden.

"It was courteous of him to pay us one of the first, nay, *the* first of his neighbourly visits," said the good parson, exchanging his tie-wig for a comfortable flannel night-cap, when he was once more alone with his daughter.

"Next time he comes I will reward him with some of our golden plums," said Betty gaily as she fixed her white teeth in the tender skin of one that was lusciously ripe.

Mistress Mary to her maid described the newcomer thus:

"He is tall, Deborah, very tall; slight, but with shoulders of great breadth, and a square neck—one would say that his strength was herculean. His eyes are dark blue, his nose a trifle arched, brows thick

and square, a sweet mouth—a very sweet mouth—but wondrous stern all the same. But his manners, Deborah, and his curling dark hair, just slightly dashed with powder—his manners are perfect! his hair is divine! Heigh-ho, Deborah!"

CHAPTER III.

UP from the plains a steep road rose on the downs, a road so steep, so dazzling white that it looked like a white thread hanging on a green surface.

Betty Ives rode slowly up the hill, leaning slightly forward to ease her horse as she did so. Though November had set in, the sun was still powerful, and both horse and rider were a little oppressed by its heat.

Some very close observer might have seen a change in the girl's face—a very slight change, something that deepened the expression of the lovely eyes, something that played softly like the shadow of a great happiness on the mobile lips. She was thinking, thinking deeply as she rode.

Folks said that Betty Ives was very hard to win. Ruth Thornton, the squire's buxom daughter, would have given years of her life for one of the passionate appeals young Robins had made so often to Betty in vain. Lady Rachel Tremaine had almost broken her heart when Betty, at the Newbury ball, had so attracted Sir Harry Clare that he had no eyes for other than her. Yet amid her many adorers, fair Betty, with the

carelessness of inexperience, passed unpitying and fancy free.

But now times were changed: fair Betty's heart was given away.

Yet John Johnstone had not found his courtship easy, it was long before he made any way. He wooed proudly, and she took his subjection as due to herself, and was not grateful for that which she deemed her right. But the young man loved her the better for this, for he was one of those who value most that which is hardest to gain.

Betty with her rein on her horse's neck was thinking, wondering how it was that John Johnstone was always present to her mind, that her eyes sought him in the hunting-field, that those evenings were dull and lonely on which he did not come in for a chat with her father before supper-time, and all the world felt flat stale, and unprofitable, during various short absences of his, when he would disappear for three days together and none knew whither he went.

Betty's horse had mounted the white hill at last, and now scoured swiftly away over the springy turf on the wide downs.

For miles she passed no human habitation, then Betty reached her destination.

Low in a hollow dip of the green grass sea nestled a small cottage. No tree or bush within miles, the unbroken winds tore round it, the snow often banked up against it; but the owner, one of Mr. Ives' pensioners, appeared to care little for wind or weather.

As Betty rode up, she sent her clear, ringing voice before her:

"Rachel! Rachel Ray!"

Then paused suddenly; for, fastened by the bridle to a low post close to the cottage door, she perceived a fine bay horse that she knew well. She drew rein, swiftly debating within herself whether she should go on or draw back; then, shaking back her proud little head, she rode forward.

Betty feared nothing on earth; should she be scared by the odd feeling in her heart that made it beat so fast and loud? A thousand times no.

Before she had reached the cottage, the door opened, and a small troop of ragged children tumbled out to meet her—children with black elfin locks and eyes gleaming like live coals, showing wild gipsy blood.

Betty leapt from her horse, and called the eldest boy to her side.

"Here, Reuben," she said, "I will give you a silver penny if you hold Conrad steadily, and like a good boy, while I visit your grandmother."

She opened the door with a slight knock, and went in. An odd sight met her eyes.

By the table stood the vigorous figure of old Rachel Ray, handsome yet, with the dark gipsy characteristics of her grandchildren, before her the tall, fine figure of John Johnstone in full hunting scarlet, just stooping in the act of giving her a kiss.

The old woman started, and pushed him aside when she saw Betty come in. She advanced to meet

her visitor, who stood during the space of a minute without advancing, so great was her astonishment.

"You are surprised to see an old woman kiss her nursling," cried old Rachel; "but it would be odd if he did not, bless his brave heart!"

"Not surprised at his kissing you, Dame Rachel," said Betty, a little less steadily than usual. "But I did not know that you were acquainted; I thought Mr. Johnstone was a stranger to this part of the world."

The old woman turned her eyes on the young man, eyes brimming with burning tears, and with a look of entreaty in them.

John Johnstone gave a little impatient stamp of the foot.

It seemed to Betty watching them that thus he gave a mute answer to some mute question or entreaty made.

"Sit down, sit down, my pretty lady," said Rachel, drawing forward and dusting a chair; "you are welcome as flowers in May, or as the first swallow that heralds the spring. Are you well, my bonnie dear, and the good gentleman your father?"

"We are all well, dame. I am ashamed not to have been to see you for so long, but I am glad that you have had other visitors," and she glanced at Mr. Johnstone.

"We are old friends," he said, with a smile of rare sweetness. "One of my most faithful servants and friends was my foster-brother Harry Ray, Rachel's eldest son."

"Aye, aye, was!" cried the woman, her voice rising to a kind of wail. "We speak of Hal Ray in the past now."

Johnstone bit his lip, and a bitter frown contracted his brow.

"Alas! is he dead, dame?" asked Betty tenderly.

"Aye, dear heart, dead, and his bones have no grave, and happen his spirit no rest."

"This is terrible," said Betty, with a shiver.

Mr. Johnstone moved restlessly to the window, and busied himself with his sword-knot.

"I have often told you, good mother," he said—and his voice had in it an odd mixture of grief and irritation—"that the less we dwell on these things the better. Mistress Betty," he went on hurriedly, "Harry Ray, when he left my service, joined his fortunes with wild Jack Barnstaple. He had ill-luck, poor lad; he was taken and . . . . and hanged."

His mother uttered a shuddering cry.

"And by the road he must hang," she cried, "till the earth and the wild winds have done their worst, and never a one to scare the wild birds from the flesh of my boy!"

"Dear dame," said Betty earnestly, "the soul recks little of its earthly tenement."

"God rest his soul, he was a good fellow and 'brave,'" said Johnstone earnestly.

"I also have seen Wild Jack," said Betty, willing to turn the poor woman from her troubles.

"Seen him! seen Wild Jack?" cried she.

"Aye, seen him and been his prisoner; and say

who will to the contrary, I have reason to maintain that he is a true gentleman."

"Is it so?" said Mr. Johnstone, smiling. "A cut-throat, a robber, a highwayman a true gentleman?"

Betty gave him an indignant glance. "I speak of him as I found him," she said. "And we of the country have always known how to distinguish between common malefactors and the gentlemen of the road."

"So, so!" answered Johnstone, still smiling. "And yet both end too often on Tyburn Hill."

Betty turned pale and shivered. It seemed as if she gasped for breath; she turned her large eyes on her lover and said, "Ah, these matters are far too serious for so grim a jest."

But her eyes were caught and arrested by the look which met them; so long, so burning with passionate admiration and love, with a strange expression of exultation, almost gratitude. Betty's heart beat fast. He had forced her to love him, and such maidens as Betty Ives, when they give love at last, give life itself. Dame Rachel glanced from one to another, then she arose quickly, and from a dark corner of the room produced a pack of cards. "Come, fair lady and noble gentleman," she said, with a touch of the professional whine in her voice. "Will you hear your fortunes? Cross the old gipsy's hand with silver, my pretty dears, and you shall hear all the good things, now, present and future, that may fall to your lot."

"Will you try?" said John Johnstone, bending forward.

The rosy colour rushed into Betty's cheek, the light shone in her eyes.

"I will try," she said, half laughing.

"Then all that is good we will believe, and all that is bad will cast to the winds as false and untrue."

"Nothing can be bad in the future of faces like yours, dear hearts," said Rachel, rapidly shuffling the cards.

Some minutes passed, the gipsy busily, and with growing discomfiture, turning the cards, trying them in every way—the two were silent.

Betty leant her head on her hand, shading her eyes from view, full of shyness for the first time in her bold young life. John Johnstone gazed on her with his soul in his eyes, and yet with a strange impatient interest in the business that was going on.

Presently Rachel flung all the cards down with violence.

"I am losing the trick of the trade," she said, in a harsh, frightened voice. "I am getting afraid of the cards, and when you are afraid of them, they master you."

"Tut, tut!" said John, kindly. "Do not blame yourself, good mother, if they show not all the gilded coaches-and-six and the lovely bride and gay bridegroom you would fain have promised us."

"The combinations turn to evil—all evil. Pah! it is the old story. I was afraid of the cards, and they have mastered me."

"Was there no warning contained in these strange combinations, Dame?" asked Johnstone, eagerly.

"I deal not in warnings," said Rachel, hastily. "Did I deal in warnings, the reading of the cards might prove useful to you both."

"Come, come," he said, "you speak in riddles. The warning. Is it the same for this gentle lady as for my rough self?"

"Aye, aye, for both—for both." She bent down, and laid a dark hand on the shoulder of each, and peering into one face after another, she muttered:

"Beware of Wild Jack Barnstaple!"

Both started. John Johnstone flushed angrily; he rose to his feet.

"We have had enough of this fooling," he said. "The day is advancing, madam," turning to Betty. "Will you vouchsafe me the extreme pleasure of being your escort home?"

As Betty was about to answer, she was arrested by the sound of singing outside, in a voice so wild, loud, and sweet, it seemed the very embodiment of the music of Nature.

"Who is singing like that?" asked Betty. "How beautiful! and how marvellously sad!"

"It is Nora Ray, only our Nora, dear heart. Her voice is sweet as the lark, and she sings old songs she gathers in the villages round."

"Hush, hush, listen!" cried Betty, and she stood with upraised hand, listening.

The air was in the minor key, the voice of the

singer thrilled to the very nerves, every word came distinctly to their ears.

"Aye, Margaret loved the fair gentleman,
Aye, well and well-a-day,
And the winter clouds gather wild and fast,
He loved, and he galloped away.

Aye, call him! call him over the lea,
Thou sad forsaken lass,
Never more he'll come back to thee
Over the wild green grass.

The swallows return from over the sea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
But lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away.

Aye, call him! call him over the sea,
The winter is coming fast;
He waved his hat, he bowed full low,
And smiled as he galloped past.

Aye, call him! call him over the lea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
Lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away."

A strange shiver came over Betty Ives, a thrill such as she had never experienced before. She glanced at Dame Rachel. The old woman was nervously fingering the cards, and muttering to herself. Then her frightened eyes turned to her lover; he read some appeal in them.

He held out his hand and caught hers, and pressed it for one short second to his lips.

The door burst open, and the girl who had been singing came in; her black hair was all blown back,

the great black eyes staring out of the small dark face. She drew her scanty cloak round her, and laughed a shrill laugh.

"Will you have your fortunes told, my good gentleman? my pretty lady?" she cried. "Cross little Nora's palm with a silver sixpence, then."

"No, no; we have had enough of that. Come, dear madam, we must be going," said Johnstone; and he conducted Betty to the place where Reuben, faithful to his trust, held the reins of her horse.

"Do not be so long without coming to see me again, dear heart," cried Rachel Ray, standing outside her door.

"No, no, I will come soon," answered Betty. Johnstone placed her in the saddle.

"A good gallop over the downs will bring back the colour to your cheek," he said, softly. "You are so white and cold."

"There is something ill-omened in all here," said Betty, with a slight shiver.

"Here, Nora," cried Johnstone, flinging her a piece of gold. "This is to make up for the loss of that silver sixpence."

The girl laughed loud and shrilly. "Ah! ah!" she cried after them. "The good gentleman! the brave fellow! For this I would follow you! aye! follow you, my lad, from Belton to Tyburn Hill!"

Part II.

CHAPTER IV.

"IT is then true, my Betty? And I am to wish you joy?" cried Mary Jones with both hands outstretched.

"It is true," answered Betty, her lips parted in a smile of sunshiny happiness. "Congratulate me, Mary; yes, wish me joy, for there is no happier woman to-day between the Northern and Southern seas."

"I am glad to see you so happy, dear child!" cried Mary affectionately, but there was something pinched and starved in her voice. Ah, pity for those who possess the capacity for love and yet must go hungry to their dying day!

This odd want is none the less bitter that it meets with scant sympathy in this hard world. In the breast of many an unsought woman lies a wealth of wasted treasure -- treasure which no one has cared to seek, and yet what a treasure it might have been!

Mary Jones's heart had grown somewhat starved, but it was the heart of a loving woman still, and when the bright sunshine of her young friend's happi-

ness shed its light on her soul, it awakened an echo of old dead days, and swelled it with sympathy.

"Sit down, sweet one," she said, drawing Betty down on the sofa beside her. "Tell me all about it. When did he ask you to be his wife?"

"This morning, Mary, only this morning; but it seems as if years had passed since then."

"And what says Mr. Ives? Does he welcome the stranger who takes from him his only child?"

"Not far, Mary—but two miles away—and my father is always to live with me, if he so will it, so says Mr. Johnstone."

"But is he pleased?" asked Mary, with a little persistence.

"Yes, he is well pleased; he already loves him as a son. Mary, perhaps the thing that most readily won my heart was his reverence and tender courtesy to my father."

"I can believe it, Betty. His manners are perfect! I was only making that same remark to Deborah this morning. Yes, I knew only one other whose manners could compare with your John Johnstone's, Betty—only one."

Mary Jones sighed deeply and looked down. Betty gently pressed her hand.

Hitherto she had always laughed at her friend's tender recollections; now, it seemed to her that her eyes were opened to her former cruelty.

But Mrs. Mary was too much interested to waste too much time even on such reflections.

"You must tell me all, dear," she said. "What is

his family? Has he parents living, brothers and sisters? Is his fortune assured?"

"Ah, there is some little difficulty there," answered Betty, her face falling a little. "He has no parents, no friends, no kindred: he is all alone in the wide world. And as for his fortune, that is assured, but it is somehow mysteriously bound up in trusts—I know not what. He has no papers to show my father, he asks for perfect confidence."

Mistress Mary was a prudent woman. She pursed up her lips and uttered a little sound expressive of discontent.

"Dear Betty," she said, "it is doubtless a very good thing to be in love with a stranger romantically, but still——"

"He is no stranger," said Betty quickly.

"No, no, not to be called a stranger," cried Mary, laughing—"an old and valued friend of two months' standing."

"The time is short," said Betty, thoughtfully. "But a whole lifetime seems to have passed in that space! My father," she cried, as Mr. Ives entered the room. "Here is Mistress Mary Jones."

"Come to offer my warmest good wishes," said the lady, "and also all the assistance in my power when the important day approaches."

"I shall indeed be glad and grateful for your help," said Betty, affectionately.

Mr. Ives persuaded Mary to remain for supper. The candles were brought in, and the room looked bright and cheery.

"Stay with me and cheer my loneliness," said the parson cheerily. "The young folk will stroll in the garden till supper be ready. I am too old for dewy twilight walks, egad."

Was it a new idea that flashed into Mary's mind that caused her to start? She glanced at Mr. Ives' comely person, at his glossy cassock, his smartly-buckled shoes, at the neat tie-wig which surmounted a face which she hastily pronounced as handsome as it ever had been.

With a sweep of her fan, Mistress Mary renounced her waning youth.

"Stay with you!" she cried, "that will I! and you and I from the window will superintend our dear young ones. Alas!" she said, with a languishing look, "how lonely the house will seem when you are bereft of your daughter."

Mr. Ives sighed deeply.

Outside, in the gloaming, Betty Ives and her young lover walked slowly backwards and forwards under the orchard trees.

"No father, no mother, no sisters!" she said, looking up into his face. "No one to love, no one to love you!"

"I do not know whether I am to be pitied," he answered with a light laugh. "My life has been one of strange vicissitudes. No, no, sweet Bet; I have often thanked God that no one shared my life."

"But, you will never do so again," she said earnestly.

"Sweetheart!" he answered. "Until you have

once drunk of the cup of happiness, you know not what it is; but once tasted, you can ill-spare it thenceforth."

"Ah, some day you will tell me about this life of yours—will you not?"

"Some day, my heart, when you and I are alone together in the fair woods of Belton—when you are my precious wife, and when days have passed on, and our full trust and confidence each in the other is proved and strengthened by time. But not now, beloved, not now."

"Have you known griefs, sorrows?"

"A few."

"Happiness?"

"Yes, and triumphs often."

Betty bent down her head thoughtfully; fain would she have swept away the veil of mystery which surrounded her betrothed, but she would take no step to do so—no confidence was precious save that which was given unasked.

The twilight gathered softly. Presently Betty turned round, and placed her two clasped hands on his arm, her noble head proudly raised, her large eyes seeking his.

"Look you," she said, "there is something I would wish to say to you. You and I are to be man and wife—and I have accepted you—I know nothing of you, John—I know not whence you come, or from among what kinsfolk; I have taken all on trust. I love you, John, so I fear not. They say that perfect love casteth out fear. There can be no dark secret in

your life, no deed or deeds that you shame to disclose to me. I take you with infinite faith. So tell me what you will, dear, or as much as you will. My heart will give you gratitude for the confidence you give to me, and, John, my love shall cover your silence."

With a sudden impulse John Johnstone was down on his knees; he pressed her hands to his lips with a passion akin to worship.

"My life, my love!" he cried; "my whole life shall be devoted to rewarding your trust in me. Oh, would to God I were more worthy of you!"

Within the house Mistress Mary and Mr. Ives were very comfortable. They played a game of patience together (in which the former was a great proficient), they chatted, they waxed confidential; and not till Dame Martha summoned them to sup did they perceive the lapse of time. Mr. Ives called from the window, and the betrothed pair came in, their eyes shining and dazzled by the bright light.

Matters went on happily thus for many days—it seemed that the course of true love was to run very smooth—when one evening a little incident occurred that startled all.

The little party of four were dining together, as they generally did. Mr. Ives was in merry mood. He poured out a glass of good red wine—wine that was not often brought forth from the depth of his cellar; he bade John Johnstone fill up his glass, and, as each gentleman raised it brimming to his lips, pledged "His sacred Majesty, good King George."

With a sharp rattle John Johnstone's glass crashed untasted on to the table, and the red wine splashed like blood on the white napery.

The parson looked at him, and the colour forsook his cheek.

Mistress Mary glanced tremulously from one to another, and half rose in consternation.

The colour flushed high in Betty Ives' cheek. "Was this, then, the mystery?"

The absent king held all her sympathies.

Mr. Ives moved back his chair from the table, and said somewhat unsteadily—

"Good sir, I am a man of peace. I love order and a strong government. Can I hazard my daughter by——"

Now, strangely enough, Mary Jones came to the rescue.

"Sirs," she said, "allow me to make a proposition. It is this: that not one of us breathe a word elsewhere of what has happened to-night. For Heaven's sake say nothing, keep all dark, and on this understanding" —she stooped forward, and daintily raised her own glass—"I also pledge his Majesty over the sea."

But Mr. Ives did not recover his spirits that night. Presentiments of evil haunted him, misgivings that he had not done wisely by his darling. When the small hours of the morning struck he still lay awake, tossing restlessly to and fro.

CHAPTER V.

THE days passed on, and now all the world lay under a pall of white snow. Under their dazzling mantle gleamed the dark, prickly leaves of the holly-trees with abundance of scarlet berries. Here and there a little robin-redbreast hopped to and fro, chiefly gathering round the latticed windows of the Parsonage, where morning and evening Betty fed hundreds of feathered pensioners.

Sportsmen cursed the hard weather, the idle horses restlessly moved in their stalls, and the hounds dreamed dreams to pass away the long hours.

Betty was never idle. She made it her pride that when she left home as a bride all should be found in order in her father's home. Mistress Mary took much interest in it herself, and joined her in mending and marking and sorting fine household linen that had need of much care.

Betty's own clothes were in course of manufacture, not many but rich, as should become the Lady of Belton ; above all, her wedding-gown of dove-coloured and silver brocade, all trimmed with strings and strings of orient pearls, which John Johnstone had brought her one day.

He gave her many jewels, but she loved the pearls

best, for they were his first gift, and destined, he said, for that day of days that was to make her his own for ever.

Almost every day as the time passed on he brought her a new gift. Once it was a pretty little dog, another day a ring of large rubies.

"My Betty herself is a ruby," he said, when he placed this on her hand; "a brave stone rich in colour, strong, unchanging, and the most precious of gems."

Then there was nothing for it but that she and her father should come to Belton to look over Betty's future home, suggest improvements, and choose among Mr. Johnstone's many fine horses one to be trained for his bride's special use. She was a bold, fearless rider, looking beautiful on horseback, and she had scorned his proposal to buy her a gentle lady's horse, expressing her wish to be allowed to ride his hunters. With one or two exceptions John offered her the choice.

It was a brilliant, frosty day on which the invitation was accepted. Mr. Ives laughingly included Mary Jones in the little party, asserting that two and two would be a fairer division of company.

Mary bridled and blushed and threw a tender glance at him from behind her fan, and the parson thought to himself that, after all, he was not old yet.

In every life there is perhaps one day that stands out from the others as the happiest day—one day in which the cup of joy seems full to the brim; it is not generally a day of powerful emotions, but of unbroken peace, sunshine, love, sweetness and the glory of life.

Such a day had dawned for fair Betty Ives. It

was not so unbroken for her betrothed: now and then a look of care overcast his brow, and now and then his hands clenched themselves with a slight nervous movement. All through the day he paid her a courtship so tender, so deferential, so loving, it might have been a votary addressing his saint, a courtier waiting on his queen; and as the hour advanced, and the time of departure drew near, his attentions became yet more tender, more wistful.

They visited the horses and the dogs, gave bread to the shy young gazelle that John was endeavouring to tame, to offer to his bride. Then he suddenly drew her aside, and while Mr. Ives and Mary Jones strolled onwards to the garden, he took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the door of a loose box which he had passed by hitherto.

"Here lives my best treasure, sweetheart," he said. "You must travel far, and look wide, ere you meet with his match."

Betty looked in, and her eyes fell on a magnificent white horse. It would have needed an experienced eye fully to appreciate the strength and symmetry of its proportions; to Betty he looked beautiful, and words failed to describe her admiration.

Strange that I have never chanced to see you ride him," she said. "I recognized at once the brown mare and the two chesnuts, and the bay with a white star, but this one I have never seen."

"No, I never hunt Seagull," he answered thoughtfully. "I owe him my life not once, but over and over again."

"Seagull!" exclaimed Betty. "Is not that the name of Wild Jack's famous white horse?"

"Yes, he was named after him. I bethought myself that my Seagull was as noble an animal as Wild Jack's."

"I am sure that he has not his equal in the wide world!" cried Betty.

John Johnstone turned suddenly to her and said: "Do you still keep up your interest in that poor sinner Wild Jack, sweet Bet? or has it died away in your gentle breast?"

"I shall never forget our first, and (Heaven grant) our last interview," she answered with a smile. "How he justified my trust in him!"

"Poor Jack," said John Johnstone thoughtfully, "I knew Jack well once; you were right to have faith in him. He has done good service to the Cause. Look you, dear, he never took purse or papers on the King's highway, but in the king's name who is over the seas; he never injured woman or shot an unnecessary shot—keep your sympathy with Jack. And now," he said, throwing back his head with an odd look of defiance and pride—"now there is a reward of five hundred pounds offered for Wild Jack's body, living or dead. They place a high price on the head of one, whom, to his honour, they dub traitor as well as highwayman!"

"Five hundred pounds," said Betty. "Alas! the reward is tempting."

"He has escaped so often from their very midst, has more than once been prisoner, has often baffled

his swiftest pursuers. Next time Wild Jack is taken, his shrift will be short, I warrant."

The tears rose to Betty's eyes.

"God grant him a safe escape to France," she said earnestly.

"It is a good and a charitable wish, sweetheart," said John, somewhat gloomily. "But men who have lived as Wild Jack has lived, dread exile as much as death."

"Surely," said Betty, "that depends upon whether he is utterly friendless, or has any who love him."

"Wild Jack is not utterly friendless," he answered with a grave sweet smile.

"And this also is one of the mysteries," said Betty gaily. "Do not forget your promise, that some day you will tell me all the past history of your life, and also, above all, the story of your acquaintance with the most famous gentleman of the road."

"Aye, some day," he said, closing the door of Sea-gull's home, and placing the key in his pocket.

As they turned away he said suddenly: "Say nothing about my treasure in there, dear Bet, I beg of you, neither to your father nor to Mistress Mary."

Betty looked up at him somewhat surprised.

"Oh, it is for a trifling reason," he said—"a mere wager."

So the matter faded from her mind.

The elders of the little party now summoned them —the evening was closing, it was time to be going home.

They were all to ride, Mary on a pillion behind Mr. Ives.

While the horses were being saddled, Mr. Johnstone prayed them to come in, and they entered once more the large drawing-room, and gathered round a cheerfully blazing fire.

It was a stately room, with handsome furniture, all arranged with stiff propriety, needing the trifling signs of a woman's presence to give grace and life to its appearance.

"How different it will look when my lady reigns here," said John Johnstone softly. He led her away to one of the windows, and pointed out to her the beauties of the fair English landscape, and there unseen he held her hand in both his, and once pressed it to his lips. Tea came in, in cups of delicate old china, and home-made cakes and fresh butter.

"We must have a dairy fit for your superintendence, sweet Bet," said John Johnstone. "See how pale is this butter, how thin this cream compared to what you offer me at the Parsonage."

The horses came round at last, Mr. Johnstone's bay mare with them; he would certainly accompany them home.

Indeed it seemed as if this evening he could not tear himself away, he lingered on and on, and it grew quite dark, and the moon rose over the snow, and the stars shone out one by one.

Supper was over, Mistress Mary long since gone home. It was nine o'clock—Mr. Johnstone must go. Mr. Ives sat quiet in his deep chair, the warmth and the comfort entered into his soul, and he slept.

"Come with me to the door, sweet Bet," said John lingeringly.

"Yes, even farther than that," she said, and she caught up her fur cloak, threw it round her, and followed him out to the garden gate. The crisp snow crackled pleasantly underfoot.

Old Isaac, who held the bay mare, left them when he had given the bridle into her master's hand.

"They will be wishing to kiss, mayhap," he muttered to himself, "and I'll not stand in their way, God bless them!"

John Johnstone mounted. He looked up to the sky and said, "It is later than I thought. I have a long ride before me to-night, sweetheart. I have business near Newbury. I had meant to go home and change the bay mare for my faithful Seagull, but it is too late."

"When shall you be back?" asked Betty, who was used now to his sudden departures.

"To-morrow—to-morrow at latest, and my first halt shall be here."

"Are you armed?"

"He gave a little laugh, and pointed to his saddle, well garnished with pistols.

"They are loaded," he said. "For it might fall out that I should meet with Wild Jack."

"Heaven forbid!" said Betty with a shiver.

"You are cold, sweetheart, you must go in. We must part. Oh! it is bitter to say farewell."

"Only till to-morrow, John? Only till to-morrow!"

"Only till to-morrow!" he echoed.

Then he bent down, put his hand under her chin and raised her sweet face—the moon shone on it, on the large eyes lovingly turned to his, on the wondering tender look, in which joy and pain seemed strangely mingled.

Their lips met, one long wild kiss—for the first time she heard his passionate words, "My own, my beloved!" Then he drew up his reins. John gave one glance at the moon, and noted how she mounted Heaven's arch—then he looked back no more, but set spurs to the bay mare's flanks, and galloped away.

Betty went home; she lay down to rest with a smile on her beautiful face. The happiest day must end when night falls.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN evening fell the next day, Betty lingered long at the gate.

"He could not get his business done in time," she said to herself. "He will not come to-day."

But the next day passed also, and the next, and still John Johnstone had not come home.

On the fourth day Mr. Ives rode into Wancote to hear the news, and promised his daughter that he would go over to Belton, and find out from the servants whether they had had any news of their master, and when they expected him to return.

Mary Jones came over to the Parsonage—it was an important day, for Betty was to try on her wedding-gown, finished the night before.

She looked very beautiful in it, the soft colour flushing on her cheek, her sweet eyes shining. When the little ceremony was over, Betty put her arm round the waist of her friend, and led her away out of earshot of busy Dame Martha, and the smart dressmakers.

"Dear Mary!" she said, "my great wish now is to see you don just such a dress as this wedding-gown of mine."

"Oh la! Betty, bethink you of my age," cried Mary, but tears of genuine emotion rose to her eyes.

"Yet would I fain see you my father's wife," said Betty. She put her hands on her friend's shoulders, and looked down from her greater height into her face.

"Say yes, Mary, say yes," she said.

"I must wait till the right person asks me that question," answered Mary, half-sobbing, half-laughing.

But Betty persisted: "Say yes, Mary, dear!"

"Well, then, yes, if so it must be," answered Mary. "You are a good girl, Betty;" and she kissed her warmly, and hurried away to the glass to rearrange her elaborate curls of hair.

Mr. Ives came home full of excitement. He had heard great news in Wancote; the whole town was ringing with it.

"What do you think has happened?" he cried, as he came into the room.

"Has John come home?" asked Betty, eagerly.

"No, child; and the servants say that they never expect him until he appears; he is often away like this for a few days. The news is quite otherwise. Wild Jack has been taken."

"Ah!" cried the women in a breath; and Betty turned white as a sheet.

"What will they do with him?" asked Mary.

"He was taken on the king's highway, some twenty miles from here on the Newbury Road, on the cross roads where the steep way comes down from the downs. It seems that an important paper had fallen

into the possession of some individual here, convicting many well-known gentlemen about Wancote of loyalty to him that is over the sea, and Sir Harry Clare was to carry the paper to Newbury to-night. I warrant some not very distant friends of ours were shaking in their shoes.

"They rode four together, and all well armed; but Wild Jack was too much for them. He and two others attacked the party; he seized the paper himself, after a short encounter with young Clare, whose horse he shot dead. That accomplished, all made off. The paper was lost. Some say Wild Jack burnt it as he rode, some that he swallowed it, some that he tore and scattered it to the four winds of heaven. Then, when in full flight, his horse stumbled and fell, and the four gentlemen came up with him. Entangled as he was by the fallen horse, he fought and kept all at bay with his marvellous fencing powers till his men were far out of sight. Then he broke his sword across his knee, saying that never should his trusty weapon fall into the hands of the king's enemies. He was badly wounded."

"Well?" cried Mary breathlessly. Betty sat down; she felt cold and faint.

"Well, they took him that night to the nearest village, bound hand and foot. At first they hardly knew the value of their captive, for he was not riding his famous horse Seagull; had he been mounted as usual, small chance would they have had of capturing Wild Jack. There was a hasty assembly of magistrates, such as could be induced to come. I warrant

some would have died sooner than join in what followed. They caused a gallows to be erected forty feet high on the king's high road, and there they hanged Wild Jack."

"God rest his soul!" said Betty. "John will be sorry indeed, as sorry as I am."

"Yes, John always has a certain sympathy with the gentlemen of the road," said Mr. Ives. "But, after all, order must be kept; the roads must be made safe. I know the Government will be sorely displeased that the list of suspected gentlemen has been saved—I mean lost."

It was too late, and all were too much excited by what had passed for Betty to broach the subject of marriage to her father that night, but she promised herself to do so early on the following morning.

It was very cold, and Betty could not sleep; in vain she turned from side to side, in vain she drank water and paced her room, and tried all the devices known to the sleepless—all was fruitless; her pillow seemed to her on fire, and incessantly in her imagination she heard the galloping of horses so vividly, that she rose several times and went to the window; but the night was clear, and the moon bright, and all over the country lay one sheet of untrodden snow.

She lay down once more, and about three o'clock was roused suddenly by a light tap, as of something which hit her window.

She went to it hastily; and as she did so, another light pebble hit the panes. She opened the casement and looked out. Below in the garden, in the moon-

light, which was almost as light as day, she saw standing a slight woman's figure.

The figure held up a warning hand to be silent and come down.

Betty was bold and fearless; she put on her clothes hastily, and went down. She went into the garden at once, and looked cautiously round. There was no one to be seen at first.

She waited in some amazement, when suddenly she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and, looking round, saw standing beside her Nora Ray, the young gipsy girl, looking more wild and elf-like than usual.

"Hist!" said the strange child; "I have brought you a token from one whom you know so well. His day is over," she cried with a wild grin, showing all her white teeth. "The ravens are feasting on Wild Jack's tender flesh to-night. See, here is the token; he gave it to me at the foot of the gallows with his own hand."

With a sob Betty took it from the girl's brown hand—her own little serpent-ring that he had taken from her that night that seemed so long ago.

"It shall never again leave my finger," she said. "God rest his soul!"

"You will cross the poor gipsy's hand with silver, pretty lady," cried Nora. "He never failed to do so to poor Norah Ray, not he!"

Betty quickly went into the house, gave her money, and let her out of the gate—the wild creature had come in over the wall; then she went slowly up to her room.

She leant out of the open window, her brow burning in spite of the cold.

Suddenly came on her ear the wild sound of Nora's singing, with its strange pathos like the sighing of the wind, or the cry of storm-tossed sea-birds.

Betty clasped her hands, and sank on her knees; the sound made her shudder from head to foot. She stopped her ears with trembling fingers, but yet every word fell on them distinctly, and would not be shut out.

"Aye, call him, call him over the lea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
Lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away."

CHAPTER VII.

"How pale you are this morning, my child," said Mr. Ives to his daughter.

"It is nothing. I have had a feverish night; the story of the fate of my poor friend haunted me," she answered. She could not eat, the cold had chilled her blood, and now and then she shivered painfully.

Betty sought her opportunity in spite of her bodily discomforts, and fondly caressing her father's hands she knelt down by his chair.

"Father," she said. "Dear father, you know that very soon I am going to leave you, to be married to my own true love. Our wedding-day is fixed, but I dare say he will not be back much before then. Do you think he will? Oh no, probably not."

"Why, child, to be sure he will! He will be back in a few days at the outside. Why, silly child, you will make a poor wife if you fret always when your husband is from home."

"But I do not fret. I am perfectly satisfied. Listen, dear father: when I am married and gone away with my dear love, you will look round you and see only my empty place, no hand to hold yours, no

voice to welcome you, no music to cheer you, no child to love you."

"Betty," cried Mr. Ives with a sob, "why do you show me so dismal a picture? It is bad enough already."

"I have a good reason, dear father," she said. "You see I am going so soon. I should leave you with so much lighter a heart were Mary here to take my place. She is kind and good, and true, and would love you dearly."

Mr. Ives laughed a little.

"Mistress Mary is somewhat old to replace my daughter," he said.

"Then the more suited to be your wife."

Mr. Ives rose to his feet, and paced up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped, and catching his daughter's hands, looked her full in the face.

"Would she have me, my Bet?" he said. "I may not be too old to wed, but I am vastly too old to woo."

"She will have you, father," answered Betty. "And you will be quite happy when I am gone."

So all was settled, and the elderly pair pledged to each other. The banns were asked in church that their marriage might take place at once when John Johnstone should take his bride away.

Days passed on, days lengthened into weeks, the wedding-day drew near, and the bridegroom came not.

All Betty's high courage came back, the frost melted away, and the country was open again, and once more she rode to hounds. Her colour was high, her lips feverishly scarlet, her eyes large and brilliant.

She rode with the best, and came home with the brush at her pommel.

"Why do they look at me so strangely, father?" she asked. "Old Squire Thornton, when he welcomed my return to the hunt, held my hand a whole minute in his, and it was as if he were about to speak, for he swallowed once or twice and then turned away. And Doctor Glebe would not speak to me at all, and his face was set as a mask, though I saw that he was watching me strangely all the time. Have I changed? Am I not the same Betty I used to be?"

"The same, only a little thinner, my darling," her father answered, and his eyes filled with tears.

He too had grown curiously sad of late, and followed his daughter with wistful eyes.

"Father," she said one day, "to-morrow you know is our wedding-day. John will come home, he must return to-night. I know that he will. I shall wait up till the clock strikes twelve, but if he does not come (and of course no one can tell how long business may detain him, can they?), one thing, dear father: will you take Mary to church, even though I should not be there, and marry her? She might wear my wedding-gown. To please me, father, to please me?"

"Anything, anything to please you, my own child," said Mr. Ives in a choked voice.

All day Betty wandered in the garden; they watched her wistfully, her head was raised, always listening—listening to every sound.

The hours passed, evening came, the night fell. Betty had thrown wide the casement. Her father

and Mary Jones, crouching over the fire, had no heart to speak to her, or warn her that the night was cold.

A wild stormy wind swayed the branches of the apple-trees, surging and roaring as it rushed over the downs; the candles flickered and burnt low, and from them dropped those strange waxen off-shoots that old women called winding-sheets.

At last the church-bell struck twelve, slowly, awfully.

Betty was listening still, her head raised, her finger on her lip.

"Hush!" she said, with a strange smile. "Do you hear the white horse's hoofs?"

They listened. Distinctly on the ear came the sound of a horse galloping, coming nearer and nearer, passing the door, on and on without pause, the sound of the hoofs growing faint and fainter till lost in the far distance.

Betty held out her arms. "Mary!" she said, "Mary!" Her voice was a strange harsh whisper, out of which all tone had passed. "Mary, he gallops away."

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER the lapse of another three days, it was determined that there should be no further delay of the marriage, and one morning, without pomp or parade of any kind, Mr. Ives took his bride into Wancote, and they returned home man and wife.

The only wedding-guest was the parson's old friend Dr. Glebe, and he returned with them to the Parsonage because he had a few serious words that he wished to say there.

He took Mr. Ives aside, and said abruptly, "Are you mad, Ives? Do you wish to lose that peerless daughter of yours? I warn you that you will do so, if you are not more watchful."

"I would give my life for hers," answered her father sorrowfully. "And so would Mary, who loves her dearly, but, alas! what can we do? We cannot bring back John Johnstone."

"You must send her away at once. She must have change of air and scene. At once, mark you, without an hour's unnecessary delay."

"You think it will do her good?"

"I think it the one chance of escaping fatal mischief. See, I have a plan to propose. Why not send

her to Newbury to her aunt? She is a sensible woman, and the house is full of children—they will rouse her."

"I will take her myself," cried Mr. Ives.

"Nay, nay, that would defeat my object. I want absolute change for her, change of thought, scene, companions."

"But how manage it, if I may not go myself?"

"Squire Thornton rides to Newbury to-morrow with Sir Harry Clare, and he will willingly be her protector."

"They ride?"

"Yes, it will do Betty good to ride, and old Isaac can follow with a valise full of clothes."

"To-morrow did you say?"

"To-morrow at daybreak."

"It shall be done. God grant that it may do her good."

The following morning, with many a tear and many a blessing, Mr. Ives and his wife started Betty on her way.

She made no resistance, passively assented to all they wished. When she was once more in the saddle, her spirits rose feverishly again.

Sir Harry Clare, riding by her side, felt the old fascination stealing over him again, the fascination that had well-nigh broken Lady Rachel's heart at Newbury last year. Squire Thornton saw her bright colour, and heard the old lively talk as of old, and thought how that time cures all things, and that perhaps in the days to come, his son might have a chance at last.

About half way on their journey the little party was joined by two gentlemen who reached the highway by a cross-road; they lived far from the Wancote neighbourhood. The one Sir James Templemore, the other Mr. Mat Harding.

Squire Thornton was glad to meet with friends so rarely encountered; they had secrets together, mayhap. They saluted each other cordially, their greeting of Sir Harry Clare was more cold.

It was a gloomy, windy day, and after the midday halt to bait their horses, the weather grew worse, a cold violent wind blew in their faces, now and then a driving shower of rain.

"Are you tired, Mistress Betty?" asked the Squire.

"No, no; I enjoy the free fresh air, it gives me new life."

"That is well," he said, riding on well pleased. The two cavaliers who attended Betty on each side were the new arrivals, both of whom appeared much struck by her exceeding beauty.

Now it seemed almost as if they entered into a cloud, so dark it became, so blinded were they by wind and a fresh storm of cold fine rain. The horses grew subdued; they whinnied and held down their tails tightly. It was very cold.

They moved into a short trot, but pulled up soon, breathless.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and now Betty became aware of some tall dark object looming in front of her, only as yet half visible. The wind howled past, and distinctly she heard a sort of

clanking noise, as of chains, or the rattling of something hard clanking together.

"Let us ride on, let us ride fast," cried Squire Thornton in his loud, hearty voice. As he spoke there was a whirr of loud wings, and a dark cloud of foul birds rose into the air from off that dark thing.

Betty put out her hand and laid it on Sir James Templemore's arm.

"What is it?" she said, in a ghastly whisper.

"Ah, a sad sight indeed," said he, sadly. "There hangs as noble a gentleman as ever drew sword for the king, God bless him!"

"Who is it?" she asked again; the whisper came hissing forth.

"Who? God rest his soul, he had many names. He was Wild Jack Barnstaple, *alias* John Johnstone of Belton, *alias* Daredevil Jack of the North."

"For the sake of all that is sacred, hold your tongue!" shouted the Squire, who had caught the last words.

He was too late. With a wild, hoarse cry that none who heard it ever forgot, Betty flung wide her arms, and fell back on her saddle. The terrified horse galloped furiously forward, throwing her from side to side, then violently to the ground at the foot of the gallows.

In horror the gentlemen surrounded her, and raised her inanimate form between them.

But it was long and very late before they could get her home.

After long hours her body awoke to life, but her

brain was gone. Heartbroken, mind gone, in very sooth mad, what remained for sweet Betty now?

Travellers passing by would point to the Parsonage wall, and sorrowfully tell her story. Some more curious than the rest would perhaps stop to look through the gate.

A strange sight met their eyes.

As beautiful as ever, with a strange, fearful beauty, stood Betty, her hands hanging clasped before her, and she sang to herself softly and dreamily:

> "Call him, call him over the lea,
> Aye, well and well-a-day;
> Lover will never come back to thee
> Who loves and gallops away."

Then she put her hands to her mouth, as men do who wish that their voices should carry far, and called, over and over again, slowly, "John Johnstone! John Johnstone!"—the last syllable rising loud on a long, high note.

Then she would hold up her finger, and bend her head listening, listening, listening, till she heard the sound of the galloping hoofs come nearer and nearer, passing and fading away.

Those who watched with her in the dark evenings in the walled garden swore that they also heard the sound, and their hair bristled with cold fear.

POLL MILES.

A Village Tradition.

CHAPTER I.

THE great church clock, which gave the time to the village of Castle Vere, had just struck twelve, and almost as the last stroke died on the ear the moon broke out and filled the world with hard lights and shadows. The village lay wrapt in perfect repose, man and beast enjoyed their hard-earned rest, and the ticking of the clock overhead seemed the pulse of the sleeping world.

Suddenly and very softly one latch was raised, one door pushed open, and a strange figure emerged into the road. In the fitful light she stood on tiptoe, her hands clasped on her breast, leaning forward listening intently—no sound, nothing but unbroken silence, hardly enough air even to blow back all the wild mass of Poll Miles's fair hair. For a moment the girl stood, like a wild stag pausing to let his keen instincts detect the vicinity of any foe, then she sprang for-

wards and fled away up the street very swiftly and noiselessly, passing through the lights and shadows, appearing and disappearing as she went. Now she was out of the village, out in the open fields, far from the habitations of men, alone under the solemn moon.

There was no one to see Poll Miles, no one to hear the loud wild ringing laugh that burst from her lips, or to see her gathering great bunches of poppies and corn and grass, weaving them fantastically together, and winding them round her head and her gown; and by-and-by her feet were moving, and she danced with the flowers in her hands, and laughed and played and spoke to them, as though they were living things, and then, weary as a child, she lay down nestling among her favourites and was soon asleep—and with that white harvest moon on her face, and on her small white hands, her sleep looked like death.

The moon passed away, and the sky grew paler and more wan, and the cold dawn stole over the sky, and still Poll slept on. But suddenly on the air came the far-off sound of a whistled tune. Then at the first human sound the girl awakened and sprang up, the joyous merry look was gone, and it was a pale scared maiden who hurried homewards with half-dead flowers fantastically decking her.

The reapers were coming near, with rapid haste Poll drew back, watching behind a hedge, but their eyes were too quick, and they started after her. "Hi! witch! witch! what has the witch been doing?" She fled away rapidly, and they rudely followed her as far as the gate of the field, and then shouted after

her from thence—the panting, defiant girl, who with her clenched hand hit her own brow hard, blaming herself passionately that she had not awakened sooner. In the village all was astir, but Poll crept in, not hearing the cruel words said after her, or else, perhaps not heeding them much.

It was Saturday, the general half-holiday, and it behoved her to prepare her best attire for the afternoon walk should her sweetheart ask her to-day—and Poll never doubted that he would.

"Are you going to the Green, Poll?"

"Yes, Joe, if you will go with me. Master Holmes would have me promise, and I told him I would, if you came to fetch me!"

"That was unseemly, Poll, to answer the good man so."

"Unseemly, was it? but it was in my mind, and what harm in saying it?"

"Well! come, sweetheart, Mother Basham has been gone this age, and the preaching waits for none."

"Master Holmes will wait awhile for me," said the girl, laughing, and throwing her scarlet cloak round her she came out from her cottage door.

Her lover, Joe Scott, looked at her with disapproval in his face.

"What is amiss?" she said quickly, and with a strangely sudden change of countenance.

"Your hat, Poll! it does not become a quiet maiden thus."

Her hat was wreathed round with wild flowers, scarlet poppies, and yellow king-cups and ferns. Joe's

rustic eye saw not how its wild luxuriance suited the strange beauty of the wearer. Poll Miles was about eighteen years old, her beauty of an uncommon and rare order; the face, exquisitely modelled, was very colourless, her eyes grey, sometimes very light, sometimes quite dark, as the shade of various emotions reflected in them; they were very large, and had a peculiar expression all their own, more like that of an unreasoning child than a woman—at times they would flash with anger, or laugh with keenest merriment, at others there seemed such lack of response in their expression as to take from them even a look of intelligence. Her hair was very fair, it waved and rippled in unmanageable luxuriance, straying over her brow, floating on the wind if she ran. When let loose from the ribbons which generally bound it, it fell like a pale cloud round about her. She had few rustic admirers, for she had neither bright colour nor buxom form; her figure was slender and tall, and her hands very white and supple.

There were strange stories afloat about Poll Miles. She lived alone with her father; he never noticed and hardly spoke to her, did all the house-work himself, and every day went to his work in the same stolid fashion. The neighbours cried shame that she should do nothing but idle away her days, and at one time he tried to teach her; he was a hard man, and cries and blows could be heard in the house; but whether she tried or not, the work was never done by Poll. Coming home at night he found the hearth cold, the bread spoilt, the room unswept, and Poll seated on

the floor drawing circles and rings with chalk, and twining flowers and grass into wreaths. He persevered for a time, but at last gave it up, and let the poor child be; and the neighbours, with her cries still ringing in their ears, forbore to recommend further compulsion, but they whispered to each other and spoke of old days, and of mysterious stories of the girl's dead mother, Barbara Miles, who had lived and died long ago, some twenty miles from the village of Castle Vere, farther than any of the villagers had been. One who knew more than the rest whispered that her death had been strange and awful, that she knew secrets that it is not given to man to know. In old days, he said, Miles had been gay and merry, but a spell had been thrown over him, and had compelled him to leave his home, and to wed a witch wife. He only returned after her death, bringing with him his strange, beautiful child. He maintained always a gloomy reserve, giving no account of the years of absence, and seeming to take interest in nothing but incessant toil. The neighbours said now, as malicious and ignorant gossips will say, that Joe Scott, the finest young man in the village, had fallen under some unholy spell when he went a-courting Poll Miles.

Joe Scott was a horsekeeper, and he looked so handsome when he followed his team of great chestnut horses, with a flower in his button-hole and a long tasselled whip in his hand, that not a girl in Castle Vere would have said him nay, and there were pretty girls there, with rosy cheeks and blue eyes, buxom maidens with comely faces, and in spite of all, in

spite of the strong opposition of his mother and sisters, his fancy turned to that pale-haired Poll Miles. Man is a strange being, made up of many contradictions, and Joe was young, and cared not for what might be had for the asking, and there was much vanity, and some pleasure in piquing others, and of wish to be original, and not much genuine love, in his pursuit of Poll Miles. To all the world's astonishment, for a while she constantly flouted him. This increased his ardour, and, seeing that, the busybodies attributed her conduct to coquetry, and even said she was so sure of the efficacy of her spell that she could afford to try him hard. At last, suddenly, and apparently without rhyme or reason, Poll changed her manner: she accepted his posy at church, walked with him on the bright Sunday afternoons, and they were duly betrothed.

For a little while her demeanour altered, a new gentleness came over her, and she tried to train herself to domestic duties; but, alas! poor Poll did it all so ill, that her father roughly bade her desist. The mood did not last long, and she took to teasing her lover, mocking him in her wild moods, weeping passionately when he was angry. Joe loved a peaceful life and the undisturbed comfort of self-satisfaction; her wild moods astonished, then annoyed him deeply, he began to weary of the treasure he had coveted so much when it seemed difficult to attain.

There lived in Castle Vere a certain shoemaker, Isaac Holmes by name, who by labouring hard at his trade was enabled to perform a thousand acts of

kindness and charity. From boyhood this man had possessed an extraordinary power of preaching; his parents hoped that he might become a great light as a dissenting minister, but his genius took another bent. The man was intensely humble, looking upon himself as one of the lowest on God's earth; he put himself under the guidance of the clergyman, told him of his gift of eloquence, which seemed to him at times as a snare and temptation, and asked whether it should be hidden as a talent in a napkin. He trembled for the answer, the great power welled up within him like words to a poet, or music to a composer, with a force which seemed like inspiration, and his longing was not denied. The clergyman made him a Scripture-reader, gave him books to read, studies to pursue, lessons to learn, and bade him in God's name do his best to awaken slumbering souls.

All day he plied his humble trade, and read far into the night. The money that he earned passed through his hands to the needy and destitute, and left a blessing behind it.

Isaac Holmes was a man of small stature, pale and thin, the face rarely laughing, but now and then breaking into a smile of rare sweetness; his chest was contracted and weak, and it seemed marvellous to his audience that from so frail a body could come that powerful ringing voice. His high pale forehead was shaded with almost flaxen hair, soft and thin as fine silk, his eyes were large and prominent, a pale blue colour, that in moments of excitement seemed to shine from within.

In the warm autumn days of 1739, the inspiration was on Isaac with great force, and when afternoon work was over he would go up to the favourite green of the villagers, and, gathering them round him in increasing numbers, pour out all the fervour of his soul. Saturday was the best day of all, and those who could not spare the time on other days flocked to the preaching.

Joe Scott and Poll Miles went up to the green together, she with her hat in her hand, sorrowfully untwining the flowers from round it.

Quitting the village and turning through the park gate, their way lay under the shade of an avenue of old elms. Emerging from the trees, on the right hand lay a small lake, and on the left rose a partly artificial hill, on which stood the great Norman keep which gave the village its name. The straight lines of its vast squareness were as clear and unbroken against the sky as they had been in the days of King Stephen.

The old elms were in full leaf, weighed down by the weight of their foliage.

Poll would not speak, as she walked the light and shade chequered on her fair head.

"I wish you would try and be more like other folks, Poll," said Joe, breaking silence. "It is dull to walk half a mile with not a word spoken—there, you have finished at last, tie your hat on, like a tidy maid."

But she only jerked it to and fro by the strings. He said no more, but walked sullenly by her side,

kicking the pebbles before him. Presently a sound of low laughter from his companion made him start and turn round; a large black rook was flying round and round in the air, and finally perched on her outstretched arm.

"See!" she said. "How well they know me!"

But Joe shrank back from her side, while recollections and suspicions flashed through his mind.

"It is a beautiful bird, is it not, Joe?" she said, looking up at him wonderingly.

"How do you tame them, Poll?" he asked, uneasily.

"They come to me every day to feed, and I have taught them to love me. There are many of them."

"Where do you feed them?"

"Up yonder," she said, pointing to an old fir-tree some twenty yards from the road. "I began when the snow was on the ground, and all was bound in ice like an iron chain. I cannot bear the ice."

"We had not much of a winter last year," said Joe, carelessly. "Put on your hat, Poll, there are folks in the road, and you should go to the preaching dressed like other maids."

"It is ugly now," she said, discontentedly, but, throwing the bird into the air, she put it on. The rook, to Joe's discomfiture, hovered round her still.

"Can't you drive it away?" he said, taking up a stone. Poll's eyes flashed with a blaze of anger.

"You shall not!" she cried, and stretched out her hands for the rook. The bird came whirling down, she pressed its glossy plumage to her breast, and

seemed to whisper something; then suddenly throwing it from her, she laughed.

"He will not come again," she said, and the bird, for a moment poising on the wing, took flight and disappeared. Joe felt a thrill of superstitious awe pass through him as they walked on side by side.

Presently Poll stole her hand into his.

"Are you displeased with me?" she said, wistfully.

He drew his hand hastily away, looking anxiously round to see if anyone had seen the too demonstrative action; but as nobody was within sight he gave it back to her, saying:

"You see you are so strange, Poll, it is not that I am displeased with you, but I do wish to see you do as others do. Now what did you say to that bird?"

"Aha! that is my secret," she laughed.

"Some heathen gibberish; but you see it makes folk talk."

"Why should I care what they say?" said the girl, fiercely.

"But for my sake, Poll—I always have lived with respectable people, and my wife should be like her neighbours."

"I am not your wife yet."

"Pshaw! I am talking seriously."

"You had better have gone elsewhere, Joe," said Poll, sadly.

They passed by the little lake which lay smiling in the sun, and continued their way across the park to Bushy Green. By the side of the water stood a

large disused barn. The owner of the castle often spoke of taking it away, but he let it be; it was useful for many things, and, tanned to red and brown colours, was a not unpicturesque object. The moor-hens swam on the water with the mixture of boldness and timidity of their wild nature, while stately swans floated on its blue surface; the pigeons wheeled round and round the old barn, and passed in and out of their old dove-cot. It was a happy and restful scene, and the picture was completed by the figures of the young lovers following the road—Poll in her scarlet cloak, Joe handsome and comely in spite of the frown which darkened his face. Alas, the peace and joy were not deeper than paint on the canvas. In Joe's heart struggled a swarm of conflicting feelings, doubt and distaste, hurt vanity, and love that was half self-love, yet enough of pure love to give an aching pain to his selfish nature, and in hers all the wondering consternation of a child whose soul is yet unawakened, and who knows not why it cannot please.

CHAPTER II.

A CROWD of listeners was gathered round Isaac Holmes; he had mounted on the fallen trunk of a tree, and was raised above them; he was speaking of "little sins," and his hands were tightly clenched in his eagerness.

"What do you call 'little sins?'" he cried. "Where on God's earth can you take a sin and call it little? An angry word, a sharp answer? Where is the warning, 'Take heed that ye hurt not one of these little ones—a wounded spirit who shall bear?' More criminals have been driven to the gallows by nagging tongues at home than ye wot of. Little sins! Ye call vanity a little sin, yet it grows into covetousness and swells into debt and passes onwards to ruin. Let but one drop well through the embankment, and, lo! the whole river will follow—a cloud the size of a man's hand at dawn, and at night the whole world is drowning. Were it not wise to stifle a nest of young adders before their poison has grown? They will not tarry, if undestroyed, they will grow and flourish, and death is in their growth."

Isaac's eyes fell on the young couple on the out-

skirts of the crowd, Poll with her eager face raised, her eyes fixed on his, Joe looking around to see who the company might be. His voice sounded loudly.

"Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall! Ye, who are richly endowed, who have all that humanity craves, health and self-confidence, the respect of the world, ease and enjoyment of the good gifts of God, and honest congenial work—to you I appeal. Beware of the nest of adders, brethren, dread little sins. To you the dark and awful temptations of life are as nothing, they come not near even to pollute with their foul proximity, but in the great battle of life some are assailed with battle-axe and sword, some with great stones and sharp spears, others are pierced with a thousand petty arrow-heads, some even, in the siege of the city of God, untouched by weapons of war, fall victims to burning sand, the sand that forms your hedgerows, that covers the floors of your homes. To you, prosperous men, to you above all who are happy, I say beware."

There was an uneasy movement in the crowd, the preacher began again.

"Behold the tongue is a little member! but see how great a matter a little fire kindleth! I said, and I say it again, that many and many a man for whom Christ died has been driven into deadly sin by the power of a nagging tongue. Worry! annoyance! how little they seem! but, brethren, the whole world is made up of little things, the ocean of drops of water, the earth of tiniest atoms—nothing is little, nothing is insignificant. The rich man lifted up his

voice in hell, and prayed for one drop of water—that drop to him the sum of ambition. It was but a little apple that Eve took and ate, and behold the wide world was filled with pain and remorse and death. Be gentle, be merciful! Break not the bruised reed, quench not the smoking flax. Now listen!"

The whole figure of the man seemed to dilate as he raised his hands in the air.

"There are that kill the body, but, a thousand times worse, there are who kill the soul. A whisper of evil, a little calumny, is begun! a little whisper, no more! And it passes from house to house, and it becomes a tale—maybe none vouch for its truth—further on, some say it is true; it grows blacker and stronger still, then it bursts on the village, a scandal to feed the hungry eagerness of gossips and tattlers and evil-speakers. There grows a bruised reed by the river of life. A kind hand to bind up its wounds would make it a fair ornament for the house of God. A tiny and wavering flame needs a soft, fanning hand to blaze into light and warmth; but the neighbours pass by, and they break the bruised reed, and they fling their robes on the flame, and it is quenched. But God takes up the broken fragments, and gathers the ashes together—and, lo! at the Second Coming they shall be brought forth as witnesses."

The preacher ended exhausted; for more than an hour he had been speaking, and the drops stood on his brow. The crowd began slowly to disperse with thoughtful faces; Joe looked at the sinking sun, and went off down the hill to water the chestnut team,

and Poll Miles went up to Master Holmes and sat down on the fallen tree, looking wistfully into his face. When all were gone but these two, an old hobbled donkey, who distrusted the lords of creation, dragged himself up, and put his rough head over the girl's shoulder. All animals loved, and seemed to have a strong sympathy with Poll Miles.

"I am glad that you came, my child," said Isaac, gently. The fire had faded out of his eyes now, and they had a look of yearning tenderness as they rested upon her.

"I told you I would," she said. "I should like to do all you tell me, if I could."

Isaac sighed.

"You do not always try, my poor child," he said, sadly. "One steady effort would make you curb your wild will and bridle your imagination."

"But," she said, sorrowfully, "it is all of no use. I am sorry when you bid me be sorry, I am glad when you say I am good; but nothing lasts more than one day with me. It is not wrong to love animals, is it?" she said, resting her cheek on the old donkey's neck. "They seem to understand so well, and to love me dearly. Joe hates the birds because they follow me. I saw no harm, and yet I am always wrong."

Isaac paused before he answered: he could not convince her of the village crime of unconventionality, of her idleness and fits of passion he could.

"There is no harm in loving the creatures," he said, stroking the old donkey's back. "He does not

mind that, but you should not let them follow you if it distress him."

"I never know," she said, sorrowfully. "All I do makes him angry, Master Holmes." The tears rushed into her eyes. "I was far, far happier before I knew Joe."

"My dear, dear child!"

"I was! I was!" cried the girl passionately. "He is angry, and he leaves me awhile; why should I care? I do not want to care! I long to wish him to go and leave me alone. Oh, I do not want to care! I want to be free of him, but I cannot! My heart aches, my eyes cry till I see him again, till I know he has forgiven me. Oh, why did he ever come!"

"My child," said Isaac, very gently, "you would very soon satisfy Joe if you tried to be——"

"Like other folks," said the girl. "I know that, but I am not like them, it is all different with me. Once I was a child, and I went to school, and I learnt to read; but there came one day—if it were not so bright and fine this evening I would tell you why—but I never grew up after that. I neither learnt nor grew in knowledge. What I was then I am now, and I shall never be otherwise, however I suffer."

"Come home," said Isaac, very pitifully; "we will walk together, and you shall tell me what you will."

"I cannot, I dare not," said the girl, turning very pale. Master Holmes began slowly to walk down the green towards the road. Poll kissed the donkey's

brow, and followed him with her hands clasped and her head drooping.

"Why should you say that?" said he, rather sternly, breaking the silence. "Why dare you not speak in the light of God's day?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "Oh, the pain! the terror!" she said, shuddering. "When I think of it, I am so cold, and my limbs fail me; I can neither walk nor stand!"

"Do you speak of your mother's death," he said, softly, "that was long ago?"

"I was a little child once," she said, dreamily, plucking a handful of grasses, and weaving them together. "Mother took me with her wherever she went. I know all the herbs on the country side; see this little yellow flower, it is a very powerful poison; all the herbs have strange and wonderful properties of their own, and some have no virtue except when the moon is at the full. We used to go out at night then, when it was almost as light as day, and each herb was wet with dew. It was cold, and I used to shiver, and hold fast to my mother's cloak, though I did not interrupt her, for she had no time to notice me. I could tell you strange things about some of the commonest flowers."

"Did you often go with her?"

"Yes, I loved those wanderings with my mother. I used to listen to her words, and I learnt the language of birds and beasts."

"Child, what do you mean?"

"They came to me trustingly, lovingly then; they

are more afraid of me now, for I am so often unhappy."

Poll Miles suddenly drew herself up.

"No one flouted my mother because she was not like other folks, and people came from far and wide to ask her advice—high and low came, rich and poor. You know Mistress Geraldine, with the raven hair? She was not lovely enough to win the chosen of her heart, and she came in the dead of night to beg for a love-philtre for him."

Master Holmes recoiled with a movement of dismay; but Poll saw it not, she went on.

"They are not easy to make. There are herbs to be gathered with the dew of sunrise on their leaves, and one is wanted which has grown in such secrecy, that no human eye has rested on it, and all this takes time; but we made it at last, and it was too late—he was wedded to another maiden. I can feel for her now," said Poll, pressing her hands to her throat. "I wish we had hastened it more, but the moon was on the wane when she came. I looked out every night to see how she wore away to a pale crescent, but it was long before the full moon, and so it came about that it was too late. She turned bad and cruel, this Geraldine (poor soul! I do not marvel now), and she separated my mother and me. They sent me away upstairs, and they sat together at night. I could hear the fire roaring, and a strange hot odour came up where I lay sobbing alone in bed, and my mother would never tell me what she did with Mistress Geraldine in the night hours. Once I found in the early morning a great

waxen doll, and I thought that it was for me, and I was so glad, and I held it in my arms and sang for joy; but my mother took it away with angry words. After a while, Mistress Geraldine came no more. We were rich then, and I should have been all full of joy, but that a shadow seemed to have fallen upon my mother, and she never smiled or played with me again."

"And your father, what of him?"

"He never lived with us. He did not love my mother, and for that I hated him. All of you who blame me that I can neither wash nor bake bread, nor cook dinner nor sweep out the house, you do not know what I can do, or all the strange things that I know."

Master Holmes seized her arm. Poll laughed that low laugh.

"I use my powers no more," she said. "I have never hurt anyone; my heart is not hard enough, though my will sometimes is strong. I could not do that, but I could use the sweet life-giving herbs to heal sickness, and make true lovers of idle swains; and there are essences pressed from their leaves, good to make maidens lovely; and all this and much more I know."

"Poll," said Master Holmes very gravely, "have you ever prepared any philtre for Joe?"

"Never, never!" she cried earnestly. "He came of his own will, I did nothing; but on the morning he told me his love I went to the hives and told it all to the bees, so I know now that all will go well."

A strange pain contracted the good man's heart; he felt as one feels who sees pain coming on a helpless child, and cannot avert it.

"How old were you when your mother died?" he said suddenly.

"I do not know how long ago it was," she answered, turning very pale. "One early morning we were together, when the door opened, and Miss Geraldine came in, and she carried a letter in her hand, and her face had on it a triumph and a kind of joy, and stronger than all, an awful despair. She bent down and hissed something in my mother's ear, and she threw into her lap a roll of golden guineas, and the string broke, and they scattered over the room, and I ran after them to gather them up; and as I sat on the ground gathering them together, I was suddenly frightened, for my mother and Mistress Geraldine stood grasping each other, and staring into each other's eyes. I burst into tears. Mistress Geraldine suddenly went away, but mother never heeded me. From that day the joy of my life was at an end; she grew feeble and ill, she used to tremble violently at every sound, her eyes grew larger and larger. She used to lie crying and moaning all day. At last she sent for a priest, and was a long, long time alone with him. I know not what passed, but I heard loud words, and my mother wailing for pardon. Then he went out of the house, as white and stern as a spectre. He came again, and tried to take me away, and my father tried also, but I escaped from them again and again. One day we were alone together, and my

mother was frail and weak, and she put out her hand, and her sleeve, hanging over the flame, caught fire. Master Holmes! Master Holmes!"

Isaac caught her hands, and held them tightly in his. She went on, panting.

"The flames wrapt her all round like a garment of fire, and she rushed out into the street. The people fled right and left, and they shrieked, 'The witch burns! Barbara's time has come!' One man was there at the well, and he threw the bucket of water he held, but it never reached her, and the folks shrieked, 'No water will quench that flame! leave her alone!' and—and——"

The grasp with which Poll held him relaxed, and she sank suddenly on the ground, her eyes fixed before her. Isaac touched her, then shook her, but she did not move. At last he knelt down beside her in tears. She began speaking again as if in a trance.

"Some flames are never quenched; there has been one in my brain ever since; whatever I do, it shines in my eyes. I was a child then, and I am a child now; life has stayed still with me. It is all that flame, with its bright light or its dull, burning spark. I must go home, Master Holmes."

And she rose up and suddenly fled away, so fast, that she was lost to view before he could gain his feet.

CHAPTER III.

THE church-bells were ringing their sweet even chimes, and the congregation slowly went in, by twos and by threes. They lingered round the old doorway chatting in low voices, lads and lassies making tryst for their afternoon walk. August was almost at an end, the sun blazed down through the windows, and the flies buzzed in the heat.

Poll sat close by the door. Joe had been lingering near when she came, and she thought he would come in with her ; but he only averted his head and joined a small group of lads, and would not see his betrothed. She felt lost and bewildered, she tried to follow the words, but she never could do that long, and while the first hymn was still ringing through the old church Poll darted out of the half-closed door and away through the village into the avenue.

She sat down in the grass with her back to one great elm, and began plucking the flowers and grasses within her reach, and twining them into her hat. She was slightly raised on the rising ground, and could see the road through the village by which the congregation must return. As she twisted the flowers she sang low to herself.

"Good morning," said a clear voice close behind her, with an unfamiliar accent. Poll half turned round.

"Ah, is it you?" she said.

"You do not seem to be pleased that I see you," said the stranger, coming forward and standing before her. She was one of the French servants from the Castle, a pretty coquettish soubrette, with bright eyes and a mocking smile.

"What do you want with me, Céleste?" said Poll, somewhat fiercely.

"Want! but nothing, only show me how you make those flowers into such lovely wreaths. Had I your talent, my fortune would be made."

She sat down on the grass beside her

"You must sing to them as I sing, and watch that the light comes from the east as you weave."

"Ha, ha! But that joke is good——"

Poll said nothing, but went on with her work.

"Why," cried Céleste suddenly, "there is a dead leaf in your wreath, take it out!"

"Not I," said the girl. "That is for luck. There is a dead leaf in all that we do, whether we live or whether we die——"

"You speak strange," said Céleste, half fearfully.

"I speak truth."

Céleste took flowers into her lap.

"Wild flowers are well," she said. "But I should like to show Madame's false flowers to you: there are roses like with dew on their leaves, and gardenias from Paris, and carnations as there are few——"

"What are they made of?" said Poll.

"Who knows? Crape, linen, paint, honey-water. How can one tell?"

"I would rather have these——"

"Ah, if you would teach me to make garlands like yours, I too would say, I would rather have these."

"You can learn," said Poll, carelessly. "See," and she went on singing low to herself. Céleste watched her fingers carefully, and strove to imitate her; she partly succeeded, but imperfectly, and stamping her foot she exclaimed—

"I cannot, but I will not cease till I can!"

Poll looked at her suddenly with her large eyes.

"You will not cease till you can," she said. "Teach me that, and I will weave garlands for you from morning till night."

"I know not what you mean," said Céleste.

"If I cannot do things, I have no power to learn," she said, wistfully. "And if I could only learn, Joe would be better pleased."

"And who is this Monsieur Joe?" said Céleste, eagerly.

"Joe Scott."

"Ah, I know him. He goes with the horses down to the lake; and I watch him make them drink. He is very kind to me, this Monsieur Joe."

"He is kind to you?"

"Yes, for here in this desert, this wilderness of country, I am lonely. I have no friends, and to-day he asks me to walk with him up to the green."

"Ah, you are waiting for Joe?" said Poll, in a strange hard voice.

"Yes, when he comes from the church I am to be waiting here."

But Poll had fled away, leaving Céleste alone.

"Tiens! c'est une folle!" said she, looking after her.

By-and-by the congregation passed out again, and began their favourite walk up to the green. Last of all came Joe Scott and Master Holmes, talking earnestly together. The handsome face of the young man was gloomy and clouded, and that of the elder eager and sad.

"Joe, you will rue it if you are not more patient now. You are grieving her heart."

"If only," said Joe, "she would try and be like other maids in her manners and her dress."

"There are many things more important than manners and dress."

"I do not see that," said Joe, doggedly. "That scarlet cloak, and all those draggled weeds, make her look like a wild woman."

"What could have made you court her?" said Isaac, impatiently.

"I thought I could teach her," cried Joe. "That she would soon become what I wished, fit to be my wife."

Master Holmes's eyes flashed. "Fit to be your wife!" he cried. "You are not fit to . . ." Then suddenly arresting himself, he said humbly, "My young friend, it is a poor love that does not esteem."

"I have always been so respectable," said Joe, almost fretfully, "and all about me have been so."

A vision of Joe's fat mother and buxom sisters passed through Master Isaac's mind, and he sighed. "Better give her up now," he said, "than wed her and break her heart."

"But I have no wish to give her up! You all seem to blame me for wishing that my betrothed wife knew her manners." Joe really felt himself injured.

"Alas! Joe, this child does not understand you; all her free fearlessness is leaving her now, for the first time she feels awkward and strange. You forget," he said eagerly, "you forget that you are none of her seeking: she would not have you at first, and only by long persuading and courting you won her at last."

"The maidens say that was to draw me on," said Joe sullenly.

"Then they lie!" cried Isaac, the force of his words bringing the colour into his cheeks.

"I must leave you, Master Holmes," said Joe very coldly, for Céleste came tripping through the trees in her pretty snowy apron with cherry-coloured knots.

"You are late, Monsieur Joe," she cried. "Already they have all gone on, and I must be in by six to dress Madame."

"Do you walk with her to-day?" said Isaac, his heart swelling within him.

"Yes!" answered the young man, trying not to look shame-faced.

"I have been sitting with your *folle!*" Isaac heard Céleste exclaim, as they walked on together. "If

you come with me I will show her to you now." And she led the way towards the fir-tree.

Isaac followed a few steps and looked. Poll was standing leaning back against the tree, with her hands stretched high above her head, two raven-black rooks perched on them, another stood on her shoulder, others on the ground at her feet, and whirling in circles in the air; it was a strange sight, and he went away with an aching heart.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE morning, very early, Céleste came out into the long wet grass; the breeze was fresh and damp, and made her shiver; her gown was pinned up, showing her dainty feet, the ribbons of her pretty cap floated on the air, and she carried a basket on her arm. Madame loved mushrooms for breakfast, and early in the morning the best are to be had, and early in the morning the handsome young horsekceper drove the chestnut team to drink at the lake.

Céleste started suddenly, and was half frightened by the sight of Poll Miles coming along swiftly up to the fir-tree; her hair was unbound and floated uncovered on the air, she carried grain and pieces of food in a fold of her cloak, and there under the tree she spread it in a circle and began a slow strange sort of dance. Céleste crept nearer on tiptoe and saw how her feet and her arms moved in time, then she grew frightened, and, stooping, began to gather mushrooms hastily, and she hoped that Poll would not see her.

Coming up the road she heard the crack of a whip and jangle of coming horses, and she began industriously to fill her basket.

Now Poll paused in her movements, and shading

her eyes with her pale hand looked all down the road; a slight movement caught her ear, and she turned suddenly, and saw Céleste stooping over the ground.

In a second the wild jealousy of the girl broke out, and over-mastered her half-learnt self-control; she flew upon Céleste, and hit her again and again, her grey eyes gleaming, her hair flying, and the terrified soubrette uttered shriek upon shriek. Help was near at hand. Up the road came the four huge horses, their scarlet tassels swaying as they walked, and behind them, with a flower in his mouth, came Joe Scott.

At sight of him Céleste burst from her assailant's hands, and flying down to the road threw herself on his breast, crying, "Save me! save me from the witch!"

Poll stood motionless now, and as Joe's angry eyes turned upon her she made a quick movement to tie up her hair, and draw her cloak around her. She went up to the two as they stood together, and said, "I did not mean it, I am sorry."

But Céleste only clung closer to Joe, crying and sobbing, "Save me! save me!"

"You have done mischief enough," said Joe, roughly. "She is ill, she will faint!"

"I have said I am sorry," said Poll, sadly.

"It is too late to be sorry when the mischief is done," he said, angrily. "Go home, while I take this poor girl up to the Castle;" and uttering a sound well understood by his horses to mean that they were not

to move, he put his arm round Céleste's waist, and half supported, half led her up the hill.

Poll stood for a moment, looking after them, her beautiful piteous face hardening and becoming rigid; they were still in sight when a wild spirit of mischief seized upon her; she pushed back her hat and cloak, letting them dangle behind her, and going into the road, she placed herself between two of the great horses, and stretching up to lead one by each hand, she turned them round and led them back the way they had come, through the village, the other obedient pair following behind.

"Soho! my pretties! come up!" she cried, and the horses stooped their sleek chestnut necks above her. They went slowly on down the street, and the children scrambled into the doorways and laughed at the sight. Poll went on till they came to a large field of standing corn, and then she led them in, closing the gate behind them, and fled away home, laughing her wild low laugh.

About half an hour later, Joe came into old Miles's house. He was white with passion, having received a severe reprimand from the farmer to whom the field belonged.

He found Poll, as usual, seated on the floor, and in no measured language poured out stinging reproaches. The girl rose slowly to her feet, and stood looking at him, motionless, with gleaming eyes. This conduct, so unusual in his rank of life, subdued Joe at last, and the words died away on his lips.

The door .opened, and drawn by the sound of

angry words, Master Holmes came in. He looked sorrowfully from one to another, and Joe began at once a loud explanation of the cause of his anger. Poll still did not move.

"She does everything that she can to annoy me," he finished; "and you know, Poll, that it is so, and I see no reason why I should bear it. This had best be the end of all that has been between us."

"Joe! Joe! be silent, you will bitterly repent all you say," cried Isaac; but Poll, with one swift movement, put his hand aside, and, bending forwards, she said with fixed eyes, "So be it, it is at an end; but be faithful, Joe Scott! do not tempt me too far. The first word of love you utter in another maiden's ear, by the memory of my dead mother I will have my revenge."

"Stop! stop! you know not what you say!" cried Isaac.

Poll uttered a low laugh, and, shivering as if with cold, she crouched down and spread her hands over the fire, her head still turned over her shoulder, watching with gleaming eyes every movement of her lover.

Joe stood silent for one moment, then he muttered, "Witch and sorceress, what harm can you do me?"

Poll laughed again, and the sound froze the blood in his veins. He could bear it no longer, and he burst away out of the house.

Then Poll Miles slowly turned round to Master Holmes, and he started violently at the sight of her face: it had changed pitiably, a grey colour over all,

a vagueness in the eyes, a strangely drawn mouth with livid lips.

"My child! my child!" he cried.

Still she crouched over the fire; she spoke slowly and with apparent difficulty, "He is gone," she said, "gone!"

"Ah, Poll, dear heart, you love him! child, weep, shed tears, I beseech of you, weep if you can."

"Never again," she said. "I have no tears left now, only laughter. I can laugh still."

Isaac was terrified at her looks, when she suddenly threw up her hands.

"Céleste! Céleste!" she cried. "May every curse that——"

But once more the words were cut short, for the unfortunate girl fell to the ground in strong convulsions.

The sun was setting behind the old keep, one glorious background of crimson and gold, on which black and sharp rose the great outline. With jangling harness Joe brought the horses to drink. There came a sound of loud singing on the air, and Poll Miles danced down the avenue, the flowers and grasses streaming from the wreaths with which she had entwined her dress and her hair. She passed her lover with a merry mocking smile, which made him shudder and mutter, "She is then a witch after all."

CHAPTER V.

THE year passed on, and the autumn leaves reddened and died, and dropped into the ever-increasing past, and hard and fast fell the cold rains of November.

Then December set in, bringing gusty snow-storms and fitful frosts, and Christmas with all its attendant joys drew near.

There was great talk of merry-making that Christmas-tide, and discussions as to where the annual village ball should be held, for in the Castle itself repairs were being done, and the floor was said to want strengthening before the whole village could dance in it again. So, after much thought, it was decided that a little decoration and fresh boarding would make the old barn by the lake a very good makeshift ball-room for this year.

The workmen were busy all day mending holes, stopping draughts, replacing the broken panes in an upper window, and the gardeners in festooning the rafters with great wreaths of laurel and box and holly. A bunch of mistletoe hung at one end of the barn, opposite to the raised platform, which the fiddlers were to occupy. There were anxious looks at the sky all the morning of Christmas Eve, and congratu-

lations that it looked clear and cloudless, and that a hard frost had covered the lake with a thin sheet of ice.

The villagers looked forward to this dance with all the anxious anticipation of those whose amusements are few; they counted the hours, the men crowded to the barber's shop, the women tried the colours of their knots of ribbon, and talked over those whom they hoped for as partners, and many a maiden wondered whether Joe Scott would be there, and whether he would relax from the sulky mood that now seemed habitual to him.

Poll Miles alone made no preparations, and seemed to give no thought to the coming festivities. There was a wild flightiness about her now which often gave rise to the suspicion of insanity; more and more, in spite of the earnest appeals of Isaac, the villagers called her witch, and repeated tales of her strange ways. Without thrusting herself forward, it seemed to Joe Scott that she was always watching him; he was superstitious by nature, and her wild threat of revenge kept him in perpetual dread—and now more than ever he suffered his thoughts to dwell in admiration on Céleste, whom he dared not approach for fear of the pale maiden's fury. He grew sullen and taciturn, and even the chestnut horses knew that all was not well.

The night came at last, and in merry, muffled-up groups came the guests to the ball. It was bitterly cold, the wind had sunk, all was still, and Nature was at work, freezing the earth in her hand of ice.

The lights gleamed, and the scene was brilliantly gay; the musicians tuned their instruments, and young feet danced involuntarily in anticipation, and the lads, sleeking down their smooth hair, looked round and chose each the maiden who seemed the fairest in his eyes, and the dance began merrily.

In his little dark room, by the light of a quivering rushlight, Isaac Holmes was plying his trade; there was no fire in the grate—that day he had given away his coals, and he was late over his work.

There came a faint knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer, Poll Miles came softly in.

"Is it you, my child?" said Isaac, putting down his work. "Are you not going to the dance to-night?"

"By-and-by," she said, wearily, and sitting down on a low stool by his side. "But the light is burning so in my head to-night that I have come to you to quench it."

"Ah! if you could but shed tears," he said, gently.

"Never again," she answered. "They have all been scorched and dried up. You never reprove me now! though I often do things to tempt you to do so. You never tell me my faults or blame me; all is different now."

"My child, it need not be so. Some day there will come down on you a blessing like dew from heaven, and soften your heart, and you will forgive, and in time be forgiven by God."

"Forgive! What is forgiveness?"

"Be patient, pardon all that Joe has done, set

him free to be happy in his own way—unsay the terrible words you uttered."

Poll shook her head slowly.

"What is done is done," she said. "But I have never injured him, nor her, though they are both in my hands—though I have strange powers, I do not use them. Is that forgiveness?"

Isaac paused for an answer. Poll's manner, and the light in her eyes, more and more convinced him that her mind was unhinged; he laid his hand on her head.

"Child," he said, "in His own good time God will enlighten your heart." His eyes filled with tears.

"Shall we go to the dance?" she cried, suddenly springing up. "I am longing and panting to dance to-night. It is so strange that they shut themselves up in that barn where the rats are dancing overhead, and do not dance in the grass under the wild white moon, as my mother and I used to do. To-night I went up to the fir-tree; but just then it was very dark, and I felt unutterably lonely, so I came down to you."

"Would you like to go, child?" he said, watching her wistfully, feeling that his worst fears were being realized.

"If you will come with me. It is very cold to-night; a long frost is beginning, and the ice will bind all closely, tightly, with its iron band. The wind has gone down!" she said, opening the door. "See, the flame of the candle hardly flickers at all. Come, Master Holmes."

He put his tools together, and, wrapping a small

worsted shawl round his throat, he took down his stick and followed the girl out into the bitter night.

As they went up the avenue the church clock struck twelve, and the peal of Christmas bells rang joyously out.

They emerged from the trees into the broad expanse of moonlight, in which the ice-bound lake was lying.

"Hark! the music! the bells and the dancing!" cried Poll. "Come on, Master Holmes, let us be merry to-night." And she hurried him on.

Over the door of the barn the men had erected a kind of thatched porch. As they drew near they perceived two figures standing within it, too absorbed in themselves to be conscious of their approach.

A low gasp burst from Poll's lips, and she suddenly drew Isaac aside into the shadow of the porch, and held him in a vice-like grasp. The low words of the two in the porch came distinctly to their ears.

"Ay, sweetheart, I could tell you a thousand times how I love you, but once is enough for me."

"Joe," said the other voice, "say it again. She never was more than a fancy, an idea, to you?"

"Never, never! She bewitched me; she is a witch, or a mad-woman, I trow. My heart's love was reserved for thee."

"You are sure you love no more that pale fury?"

"I vow I love none but my Céleste."

Master Holmes felt Poll's hands suddenly loose him, she burst from him, with a whirling sound she rushed in among the astonished revellers.

Céleste uttered a wild shriek of dismay. Isaac followed her, and his heart died within him.

In the midst of the crowd of dancers she stood, they huddled together, startled and aghast, and the music broke off with a sudden twang, only the bells outside went on steadily ringing.

Poll stood with her hands upraised, her head thrown back, pale as a Medusa with wild glittering eyes, and the words poured thick and fast.

"I have looked for truth in this cruel world, and have found only a slanderous lie! I have heard of pity and found only bitter contempt. I thought I had found love, it was mine, all my own! I never asked for it, I craved it not, but it came and it was mine own, and it turned to ashes and gall, and hatred and bitterness. The world is all evil and bad, no truth, no happiness, its gifts are all rottenness, its pleasures are sin, its love is a bitter lie! This is all life has given to me, take witness, I call upon death, I claim her protection, her calm, and—her love. And to you, Joe, false! false! false as you are: be glad while you may, be happy; and to witness your joy, I will come from my new home, and, sweetheart—you shall see me again."

She was gone, they gathered round, they flocked to the door, and down the road, everywhere, but a cloud had passed over the moon, and in the darkness she had disappeared.

The revel broke up, the dancers dispersed. Some of her fellow-servants carried home the fainting Céleste.

When morning broke they were still searching, Isaac and old Miles, the terrified Joe and others. With sickening fear they examined the lake by the earliest light, but they found it one unbroken sheet of ice.

Then the men dispersed, each to his work, for bread must be won though hearts be breaking, and all day passed without one word of the missing maiden.

It grew colder and colder. When night came Isaac felt too sick and sad to go to rest, he cowered over the fire, hoping against hope for the light tap at the door, for his darling to come softly in.

About eleven o'clock some one raised the latch, and he sprang forward with open arms.

"Oh, my child, my child, is it thee?"

"Hush, hush, Master Holmes," said a hoarse voice, which Isaac scarcely recognized as Joe Scott's. "It is only I. May I come in? I dare not stay at home to-night."

"Come in, Joe," said the old man sadly; and pale as a sheet the horsekeeper came in.

"I cannot stay at home," he said. "She will come to me first. Hark! what is that?"

It seemed as if his very hair stood on end, and the drops burst out on his brow, for just by the door they heard a well-known sound, and the two men grasped each other's hands—it was Poll Miles's low rippling laughter.

They tore open the door. There she appeared before them, distinct in the dark night, her face pale as the dead, her hair like a cloud on the air.

"My child!" cried Isaac, and he held out his arms, but they grasped empty air; and there she was, fleeting before them.

"Joe, Joe! be a man, we must follow!" cried Isaac, grasping his faltering companion.

On through the village she fleeted, the two men following still, their breath coming in loud gasps, and up the avenue, in and out of the shadows of the great elm-trees, and over the open space, then down towards the water, and they saw her no more. Once again they heard the sound of low laughter, the sound they knew so well. They went on down to the lake, stooping, then kneeling, they felt, they saw—the ice was everywhere, harder, more binding, more pitiless than ever. They crept home again, and sat watching over the fire with chattering teeth till dawn.

CHAPTER VI.

DAYS passed on, and the cold increased more and more. The frost seemed to have bound the very wind in its grasp, for it was so wondrously still. And every day the ice deepened and thickened, and a light fall of snow froze on the surface of the earth into a white iron hardness, and as the days passed men wondered what would happen. On the rivers of England bonfires were lighted, and torch-lit dances were danced on the ice, and the young amused themselves well, and the old and the ailing shivered and died.

All that white frozen world was strangely beautiful for awhile, but there were times when the utter silence, the pale sheet-like sky, unbroken by clouds, became terrible; it was as though the reign of warmth and sun were over, and that other mighty attribute of God, cold justice, reigned alone. Isaac was gone: he had taken all his small store, and, still trying to cling to hope, had gone in search of Poll Miles. He went to her mother's old home, and there the bitter cold laid its hand upon him, and for weeks he lay between life and death.

Joe Scott lived on in Isaac's home; he dared not go home. The villagers shook their heads over his

altered looks, Céleste, seeing that he no longer noticed her, turned her thoughts to another. The young horsekeeper lost all his bright smartness, his clothes were unbrushed and awry, his eyes were haggard, he never lost from his face an expression of deadly fear, and the least unexpected sound made him start like a timid child.

So weeks went by. One day Isaac Holmes came back; he crept feebly into his own door in the evening. Joe sat by the hearth, his arms on the table, his face buried upon them. Isaac touched him, but he did not move; and he heard by his breathing that he was in a profound sleep.

Isaac would not waken the weary man, but moved silently about, untying his bundle and putting on the kettle. He was weak and tired, and looked greatly aged. It was long before Joe Scott awoke, and Isaac's heart contracted with a pang of sorrow when he saw the sudden scared look come over his face as he sprang to his feet.

"Have you found her? Tell me you have found her!"

Isaac shook his head sadly.

"No, my poor lad, she is not there, and I have no further clue."

Joe sat down again with his hands on his knees.

"I knew it would be so," he said, hoarsely.

Isaac rose feebly and began looking for food; the young man raised himself.

"You are ill, you are worn out," he said.

"Yes, I have been hard at death's door."

"I thought you would never come home, Master Holmes. What a weary long time it has been——"

"Eleven weeks to-day since the frost set in," said Isaac.

"Master Holmes," said Joe in a low voice, "I dread more than I can say the end of the frost. I dread the secrets the earth will disclose."

"We must trust, we must pray," said Isaac.

By and-by the old man began to get together his materials as though he would resume his old trade.

"Leave working now, Master Holmes," said Joe, gently.

"I have no money left."

"I have enough for both; leave working, dear master, and rest."

Isaac put away his work and came back to the fire.

"You were not wont to sleep in the daytime, Joe?" said he tenderly, looking at the young man's haggard face.

"I have such terrible nights," he said. "I dare not go to bed until after the Christmas bells have ceased ringing."

"The Christmas bells?"

"They ring in my ears every night, and then I do not hear her mocking laugh; they are all fancies and dreams, but sometimes I think they will drive me mad."

"They will cease now that I have come home."

"Hark! hark! what is that?"

Outside the door came a succession of slight

sounds, clinking, clanking, and a dripping as of water. Master Holmes opened the door and looked out, the sky was all overcast.

"'Tis the icicles falling," he said; "the thaw has begun," and he drew back shivering.

Two neighbours were passing each other in the road outside; they heard their loud cheery voices.

"Whither out so late, Dame Basham?"

"I have been to beg a drop of water from Jacobs to fill the kettle."

"Ah! the Lord be praised, the icicles are falling, at last the thaw has begun."

The next day the surface of the earth was all wet, hard as stone underneath, and clouds were driving rapidly over the sky. At night a cold sleet fell, now rattling like hail, now changing into driving rain, and the next morning the world was green. Still the wells and the lake were deep frozen. On the fourth day the rain set in steadily, and the roads became one deep mire.

Then with a loud crack the ice broke from the sides of the lake and floated on the water. It was Sunday morning, and Joe had not yet left the house when Isaac came in from the pump, his face ashy pale, his lips quivering, and took him by both arms.

"Joe, Joe!" he gasped, "they have found something there, there in the lake!"

The strong young man shook from head to foot. He said nothing, only drew Isaac's hand through his arm to support him, then went up the avenue.

There were gathered some twenty or thirty people

round the water's edge, one or two men knee-deep in the water with ropes, and the clang of a hatchet told that they were still breaking up the strong ice.

One or two women came up, and would have persuaded them to turn back, but Joe put them aside silently and drew his companion on.

There on the banks they stood and looked; from under the bending ice with a boat-hook the men were drawing out something that had been scarlet. Joe staggered and put his hand to his brow, staring wildly for what would follow.

It came at last, and from among rushes and reeds they drew out the dead maiden. Then Joe rushed forward and fell on his knees and gazed on her wildly, and with a cry which echoed for years in their hearts.

Tradition says, and it has been handed down to me, that she was all unchanged, the faint colour still in her lips, the smile she had worn when she laid down her life; the long, long dripping hair fell back into the water from her pale brow, and the weeds clung to her dress, and tangled her feet in her scarlet cloak.

They forced him away, still staring wildly—among them they overcame his resistance, and forced him away from that sight.

There is a spot among the green lanes of Castle Vere where four cross roads meet. They call it in local parlance a road's deleet, and there in an unhallowed grave they laid her, for she had chosen death wilfully.

For a long time Joe Scott lay ill of a nervous

fever, and Master Holmes nursed him tenderly. When he was sufficiently recovered in body, an intense longing seized him to escape from a place so haunted by terrible memories, so he persuaded Isaac to accompany him to another county, where he soon found employment again.

Old Miles still lived on in Castle Vere; his daughter's fate seemed to have but a short-lived effect on his apathetic nature. Caring for no one and uncared for, he went on with his daily work.

And there where the four roads meet is the mound of green grass which marks the last resting-place of Poll Miles; and still in Castle Vere they speak of her as a witch, and at night the villagers will go a long way round to avoid passing the Road's Deleet.

Stories of the Present.

AU PAIR.

UNCLE GEORGE'S WILL.

A FRENCH SPECULATION.

AU PAIR.

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE one-horse carriage, very rickety, very steep to climb into, was jingling its way along the road from Orthez to Sauveterre. There was much fuss in its progress, the bells on the horse's collar shook, the wheels rattled, the drag was loose, and made a discordant noise, but for all that the pace was not very great.

There were two occupants of this uncomfortable vehicle, a young lady and a gentleman, and a small trunk was strapped on behind., betraying the fact that they were travellers.

"It seems a very long way, Dick," said the girl, restlessly; "I had no idea that it was so far. And the country is very disappointing," she added, with a little sigh.

"There is not much to be seen yet, dear," he answered; "but from Sauveterre we are to see the Pyrenees. Always impatient, Nellie!"

"I am not exactly impatient, Dick," she answered; "I am tormented with fancies. If I have not done

right, after all! if this governess's place turns out a failure, and it is a very long way from you and Aunt Mary," with a little sob.

"Oh, my dear little cousin," cried Dick, taking her hand in both his, "you make me too miserable; is it not your own doing? have not I implored you almost on my knees to give it up? Has my mother left anything unsaid to persuade you to make Holmedale your home? and you did nothing but go on with all that pretty nonsense of yours about being independent. How can a beautiful child like you ever be independent? You must be looked after and taken care of, wherever you go, and yet you preferred throwing yourself on the kindness of utter strangers to remaining with your nearest of kin, and leading the life of a princess, with all of us for your slaves."

"Dick, dear, I am almost sorry now."

"Sorry? Well, then, not a step farther will we go! you shall go back with me. Oh, Nellie, Nellie, only say the word, and back we go at once!"

"Impossible!" she said. Then, suddenly shaking her head, and smiling through irrepressible tears, she went on: "They would sue me for breach of contract! Besides, being sorry that I came does not make me wish to go back."

"Does it not?" said Dick, releasing her hand, and turning away his face to conceal his disappointment.

"No, no, Dick, you poor, dear old boy," said Nellie, with that kind of patronizing, affectionate kindness very young ladies are apt to use towards their cousins; "all my reasons for accepting this

situation were so admirable, that it would be very highly unreasonable to discard them now."

"It would be the first reasonable thing you ever did in your life," said Dick, bitterly.

He was a tall, strapping fellow, about thirty, with somewhat irregular features, his want of beauty redeemed by the honest, frank expression of a well-shaped mouth, and wonderfully kindly eyes. He wasted the strong love of his heart on this bright, fanciful girl who, being extremely romantic, and with a gilded imagination, had yet all the want of sympathy of extreme youth.

Poor Dick! how fain would he have taken her away with him, back to the safe shelter of his own lovely old Berkshire farm, where, as he fondly imagined, everything existed to make the life of his young wife a Paradise; he was wealthy enough to make farming (to her at least) Arcadian, asking nothing more of her than to share his love for his magnificent Clydesdales, his grand shorthorns—not even aspiring to the smallest sympathy for the black Berkshire pigs, so precious as to be numbered as kings only expect to be. Sally the Fourteenth and Betty the Twelfth were unique! Dick Gordon had not been brought up to do without sympathy; his mother, who lived with him, had one of those large, loving natures that influence everything and everyone with whom they come in contact. A very clever woman, also, capable, managing, full of tact. She also was very fond of Nellie Grey, the only child of her brother; and when at seventeen the little orphan was left all alone in her

dingy London home, Mrs. Gordon hastened to bring her to Holmedale, and be to her as loving, and a thousand times more motherly, than her own dead mother had been.

Nellie had been brought up in London; her father had been a fashionable London doctor, and had at one time made much money; but with affluence came imprudence; he speculated, hoping to treble what he possessed, and failed: when he died, nothing was left for Nellie—not even enough to pay for her black gowns.

The girl's life had been a very happy, if somewhat neglected one; she had had masters for all the usual accomplishments, spoke French and German with facility, played the piano rather incorrectly, and sang charmingly. No one superintended her reading, and she read every novel that she could get hold of; fortunately, those that her father's house contained were not harmful, but of a very romantic order, and Nellie's mind was full of castles in the air, wonderful ideal heroes, and strange adventures.

Her first experience of real love in real life was her cousin Dick's attachment, which he concealed for a time so effectively that had she not been enlightened by her friend, the vicar's pretty daughter, she would never have found it out.

Could anything be less romantic, more odiously common-place than to marry such a man as Dick—a man with such a close-cropped head, such a thick rough moustache, and who was not in the least fond of poetry?

Nellie hated Holmedale; she was horribly afraid of the horses and cows, always thought that Dick

would be thrown when he went out hunting, and could not be got to like walks in the fields or ploughed land; she was a born Cockney, and country life had no charms for her. When Mrs. Gordon realised that her son had really given away his heart's love to Nellie Grey, she felt as if her own heart would break; no sorrow that she had endured herself seemed to her heavier than that of foreseeing the inevitable pain that must come to her boy; yet she said to him no word of remonstrance, she knew too well the utter uselessness of such a course; but she set herself to study Nellie's character, to try and develop her really excellent qualities, and to bring them to the surface. But poor little Nellie did not want to be taken *au sérieux* as yet—she wanted to wait and enjoy herself and dream of an ideal future, and escape from the deadly monotony of beautiful Holmedale. She found the opportunity at last. A friend of her early days, a Miss Graham, was a strong-minded woman; she wrote to her frequently, urging her not to allow herself to become a dependant on her aunt's kindness, but to strike out a line for herself, gain her own bread, see something of the world. These letters, combined with her extreme longing for variety, made Nellie search the advertisement sheet of the *Times* daily, with a hope of finding something which would exactly meet with her wishes. It came at last, a rather unusual advertisement, but which took her fancy—

"On demande une Institutrice anglaise, munie de bons renseignements, au pair; s'adresser à Madame la Harpe, Sauveterre."

Nellie did what was not right: she answered the advertisement, obtained recommendations from old friends in London, and not till the whole thing was arranged did she tell her aunt.

Mrs. Gordon was much disturbed, grieved and displeased with what she had done, but unable to resist the coaxing, pleading ways and kisses of the culprit. She consented to let her go, after satisfying herself by very careful inquiries that the French lady who advertised was all that could be wished, and she was not without a secret hope that Nellie might learn in the house of strangers to appreciate the happy home she was so ready to sacrifice.

Dick Gordon accompanied her on her journey, much to his own inconvenience, in the busy spring-tide of the year; but to the last he cherished a hope that she might repent and let him take her back again.

The little carriage jingled on, crossing, one after another, long vine-covered low hills, always rising and falling with about the same unvaried view—now they passed through a village, now again dipped into a valley and up once more; vine-clad hills are more profitable than picturesque, the straight monotonous lines destroy the beauty of the landscape.

Nellie grew paler and paler, and by-and-by she put out a cold little hand for Dick to take and hold; she felt great comfort and strength in his warm, strong clasp, and she wanted comfort like a child, and sought for it without a thought of the cruel pain she was inflicting, for Dick, with the intuitive perception

of his sympathetic nature, understood the silent appeal and took it for what it was worth.

As the road rose over the last hill, and reached the end of the series, the hills stopped, and, as it were, rolled back to right and left, and they stood on a kind of high plateau, while a glorious view broke upon them.

Nestled on the hill-side lay Sauveterre, bounded in by a terrace-wall; far below, a deep valley fringed with trees, at the bottom of which, amid stones and rocks and boulders of granite, rushed the river Gave; behind, the low vine-covered hills; in front, all middle distances swept away, and a wondrous vision standing out in the clear air—the grand range of the Pyrenees, while framed in by the branches of an old chestnut-tree which hung over the road, seeming almost like a cloud in the air, rose the snow-clad Pic du Midi.

Neither of the travellers spoke for a moment—then Nellie turned and said breathlessly:

"Oh! Dick, is it not beautiful?"

But Dick did not answer; his eyes were fixed on the far distance, and there was a strange yearning look in them, solemn, intensely sad. Had an intuition come to him, all indefinite as yet, that for him also there was no middle distance in life, only a rushing torrent beating itself on the stones, and far away a vision of distant heavenly hills?

But there was no time for thought; with a tremendous crack of his long-lashed whip, the driver urged his little horse to dash into the stone-paved streets of Sauveterre at full gallop.

CHAPTER II.

"WHERE do Monsieur and Mademoiselle wish to descend?"

"At the Maison de Mabendie, Madame la Harpe," answered Dick.

"Here we are, Monsieur," and the little carriage drew up suddenly before a narrow little street. "Monsieur and Mademoiselle must get out here, go along the little street, turn to the left, and before them they will see the Maison de Mabendie. Does Monsieur propose to return to Orthez to-night?"

Mr. Gordon looked at his watch. "I must be at Orthez in time to catch the nine o'clock train," he said. "How long will it take you to take me down?"

"Monsieur must not start later than half-past six. See, an hour to rest my horses, and Monsieur must start."

"Oh, Dick, only an hour," said Nellie, piteously; she had got out of the carriage, and stood beside him trembling.

"An hour is a good long time, Nell," he said, smiling encouragement—he would help her now as much as he could.

The coachman remounted his seat and drove off

to the little inn, promising to send round a man with the boxes and small packages in a few moments; and anxious to lose none of the precious moments, in which he wished to make himself acquainted as much as possible with his cousin's future home, Dick drew her quickly with him down the ill-paved, dirty little street. The approach was unpromising, but ended in a small open court. The old house which was their destination stood in a beautiful situation on the walls, with a narrow terrace round it, bounded by a low parapet, actually overhanging the valley and the river. The valley was half spanned by a very ancient bridge, the middle arches of which had long been swept away, the rest remained, all clothed with ivy and other luxuriant vegetation. In the far distance the wonderful mountains. It would be difficult to find a more lovely situation.

The old house was large and picturesque, carrying on each end the *tourelles*, indispensable attributes of *noblesse*. It was washed all over with yellow-wash of a warm colour, concealing the thick stone walls, in many places from three to four feet thick. The narrow terrace was bright with flowers in great earthern jars.

"It is very pretty, Nellie! Come, dear! don't be so frightened!" said Dick, patting her hand, as he rang the bell.

The door flew open, and with a kind of rush, it seemed as if the whole family of La Harpe poured into the courtyard.

Outstretched hands greeted the newcomers, and a torrent of welcoming words.

It seemed as if every face there photographed itself on Dick Gordon's brain, so great was the tension.

Monsieur and Madame la Harpe were both short, both perfectly round. Madame seemed to roll rather than walk, bound rather than turn; very active, very voluble, and in a black gown flashing with jet beads.

Mademoiselle la Harpe, Amélie, was just what her mother must have been at her age, short, plump, rather pretty, with a profusion of frizzy black hair, and too large a face, all *épanouie* with good-nature.

Monsieur Jean, the eldest son, and his wife, were of a somewhat different type. Monsieur Jean, *avocat*, thin, pale, bald, and studious. As for Madame Jean, her face was as the face of a pitying saint—so sweet, so sad, and so worn. Behind stood two *bonnes*, with rosy faces and bright-coloured handkerchiefs, picturesquely tying up their black hair.

It seemed as if they could not make enough of Nellie. They pressed her cousin to stay, but he was obliged to refuse, his presence was urgently wanted at home. They then, all of them, despatched the *bonnes* to prepare some refreshment for him before his departure, and conducted them into the large, cool *salon*. Time was going, flying very fast. Dick at last boldly determined that no more must be lost. He advanced to Monsieur la Harpe and asked to speak to him in private.

But Madame la Harpe had no intention of being excluded from the interview, and she solemnly led the way into another room, followed meekly by her

lord and the tall Englishman, who seemed to them almost colossal.

"I have but a very short time," said Dick, in his frank, open way, "but I am most anxious to commend my little cousin to your care—she has no nearer relation than my mother and myself."

Madame la Harpe gave a little wave of her hand, "You may depend upon us," she said. "Her situation with us, *au pair*, makes her in all respects one of ourselves ; the advantages my Amélie derives from her, she also will derive from my Amélie, and——"

"Yes, Madame," said Dick, earnestly, "but I venture to ask even more. She is only seventeen and an orphan. I ask for her your tenderness, your care, your consideration."

Monsieur la Harpe gave his chest such a resounding thump that Dick quite started.

"Faith of a *père de famille !*" he exclaimed. "She shall be as our own child, and with your concurrence, my good sir, I will marry her myself."

Dick started again. Madame la Harpe nodded approvingly.

"But, my friend," she said, "perhaps Monsieur intends to marry her himself; it is his right, and as her only male relative, his bounden duty ; of course, if he should desire it, I also will do my best."

A confused sense came flitting over Dick's bewildered mind that, like Boaz, as nearest of kin, he had a solemn duty to perform in espousing his cousin ; then the absurdity of the notion crossed him, and he could hardly help smiling.

"In England," he said, "it is our habit to let young ladies please themselves about marrying."

"That is a very strange and reprehensible custom," said Madame la Harpe, severely.

"*Madame est servie*," said a maid at the door.

"Ah, and there is so little time, and farewells to be said and all!" cried the good father. "Monsieur," with another portentous slap on the breast, "you may rest contented, we will take every care of our sacred trust. You may put every confidence in me."

"I am sure I can!" said Dick, heartily. He read something straightforward and honest in the little man's black, bead-like eyes.

Monsieur la Harpe rose and bowed profoundly, Dick returned the bow; Madame la Harpe courtesied, and Dick repeated his salutation. It was like the seal of some solemn compact. Then she led the way to the dining-room.

If Dick Gordon's healthy English appetite had looked for cold beef, it looked in vain. The repast consisted of a vast omelette, salad, bread and fruit, and excellent *vin ordinaire*. Nellie could not eat a mouthful; her eyes were fixed on her cousin as if she would never take them off. The time was going so fast.

Dick Gordon looked again at his watch. "I ought to start for the inn in five minutes," he said. He gave a quick look round at the whole assembled family: his look ended imploringly on Madame Jean. A flash of sympathy passed between them. She rose.

"Let us go, my friends," she said. "Our friends would wish to say their adieux in private; and little demoiselle Nellie must have many messages to send."

"You are quite right," cried all the kind-hearted family, who would never have thought about it themselves, and they all bustled out.

Nellie waited till they were all gone, then she ran up to her cousin and hid her face on his shoulder.

"Oh, Dick, dear Dick," she said. "I have been so wicked, so ungrateful. I have never been half good enough to you, and now you are going away. Oh, Dick! say you forgive me; and give my dear, dear, dearest love to Aunt Mary."

"Forgive you, Nellie? Child, there is nothing to forgive. Nellie, I have never told you—I did not want you to know; but, darling, you are my own heart's love! Hush, hush; I only tell you that you may know that whenever you want a home or—or a friend, a brother or protector, I shall be waiting for you—to welcome you, my little love, and ask nothing—nothing in return."

She was sobbing on his breast.

There came a low knock at the door, and Madame Jean's soft voice:

"The *voiturier* begs that Monsieur will come."

"Dick, Dick! kiss me," cried Nellie, almost frantically, for her cousin had wrung her hands and was turning away.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye."

"Dick, won't you kiss me?" she cried, putting her arms round his neck like a child.

Then he stooped and kissed her passionately.

"God bless you and help you, Nellie! Good-bye."

He went out. They were all waiting for him outside. How he got through all the salutations, bows, and farewells he could not tell. But it was over at last, and he was once more rapidly driving down the road to Orthez.

Meanwhile Madame Jean stole quietly back to Nellie, and allowed her to sob out her grief and loneliness in her kind arms.

CHAPTER III.

IN a very few days Nellie Grey was quite at home in the Maison de Mabendie, and now the spring days were lengthening, and the sudden summer of the South burst upon them in all its hot splendour.

At first Amélie and Nellie, still somewhat shy of each other, worked well together, alternately at English and French, but by degrees their ardour for study somewhat waned, and as it grew hotter they grew more desultory.

The life was very different to anything to which Nellie had been accustomed, but the facility with which she adapted herself to it was quite astonishing. Sometimes she wondered with a little start of dismay, what her Aunt Mary would have said if she had seen her in the mornings going about the house in a loose dressing-gown of Pompadour print, with her hair not done, only rolled up over a comb. At first she felt very untidy, but all the others were the same, so she soon began to think it impossible to take the trouble of dressing herself before it was time for the twelve o'clock breakfast. The food at first seemed a little strange: meat was only to be had once a week at Sauveterre. Nobody expected it oftener—not the

La Harpes, the wealthiest people in the little town; not the Marquis and his Parisienne wife, who came from Paris to spend the summer in their pretty, old château—nobody thought it necessary. The town was full of hens and chickens: eggs abounded, and formed the *pièce de résistance* at every meal. Then Jeannette, the cook, was so clever at all kinds of soups, and would go along the roads pulling little tufts of foliage out of the banks, from which she would produce a delicious *maigre* or a fresh salad that was quite astonishing.

Nellie Grey was a Roman Catholic, as her mother had been before her. The church stood outside the town, and was not in any way remarkable, except for the beauty of the view. Indeed it was impossible to stir out of the streets without coming into sight of the distant Pyrenees, from early morning to late evening constantly varying in the colour of their splendour.

One of the prettiest spots was the little cemetery, lying on the side of the hill. Thither the two girls would walk every Sunday evening before the hour of the last service, the *Salut.* They accompanied Madame Jean, for in the little cemetery lay one of the secrets of her sadness—two baby graves side by side, their little mounds railed in with white railings like the sides of a child's crib, and within a bright, wild bush of flowers, varying with the season of the year, always sweet-smelling and luxuriant.

Madame Jean would often kneel on the wooden step at the foot of the tiny graves and hide her face, and become so absorbed in prayer, that she would

hear nothing—not even the church bells—and the two girls would rouse her tenderly, and glance at each other with awe at the sight of her far-away look. There was another secret in her sad life: Monsieur Jean believed nothing. He was tolerant; he did not scoff; but, for all that, he had no faith.

"Nellie," said Madame Jean, very softly, one day, "the Holy Innocents must have a peculiar power in prayer, for their prayers must be so pure, and unbiassed by even natural earthly love. Do you not think so?"

"I do, indeed, dear Madame," said Nellie, gently; and Madame Jean said no more.

One day Madame la Harpe came into the *salon*, where all the younger ladies were busy at their different occupations.

"My children," she said, "I have a good deed to propose to you for the improvement of your souls. Are you willing?"

"Assuredly," said Amélie, looking up with a smile; "*Fi donc!* mamma; do you doubt it?"

"It is old Benoîte come up again. A hundred more francs are wanted. Your papa will give five; perhaps among us we can make up a few more."

"Who is old Benoîte? What is it for?"

"You shall go to the kitchen and hear the story, *mignonne*," said Madame Jean.

"What do you say to a *quête*, mamma? A begging expedition?"

"Just what I was about to propose, Françoise. You and Amélie can take half the town, and I myself, with Nellie, can do the rest."

"Oh, no!" cried Nellie, shrinking, "I do not think I could go begging. I never did such a thing. I should not like it at all."

"Then, how very good for your soul!" said Madame Jean, quickly, and smiling.

"You will not mind, Nellie," said Amélie, encouragingly. "Mamma will do all the talking. She is the best *quêteuse* in Sauveterre."

"Go to the kitchen, *ma fille*," said Madame la Harpe, "and take Amélie with you, and hear Benoîte's story; she talks French, not Basque."

The two girls went down to the kitchen. A strong, handsome-looking old peasant woman was seated in the place of honour by the window.

Jeannette was peeling onions in a big wooden bowl; Célestine, the other *bonne*, balancing herself backwards and forwards on her pointed *sabots*, doing nothing. "Mademoiselle has not seen Benoîte," she said, pointing out the peasant with admiration.

"Ah! so this is the young foreign lady," said Benoîte, not rising, but lifting up her head, and looking at Nellie with a pair of fine dark eyes, strangely brilliant and clear. "And I hear that she is charitable, and never omits to give her *sous* at the church door. I may surely depend upon help from her."

"Surely," murmured the two *bonnes* together.

"But, then, Benoîte," said Amélie, playfully, "this young lady sees you in a beautiful dark cotton gown, with a crimson handkerchief and a silk one on your head. She must say to herself, why does this rich person beg—*hein?*"

"So she knows nothing, my little demoiselle? Sit down, sit down, you shall hear;" and with the gesture of a hostess rather than a guest, she made the two girls sit down on the bench before her.

"I was young once, *mes filles*," she began, "and I had a young husband; he was very bad, very wicked. Most husbands are. Be advised, my children, do not be so foolish as to marry; the single are happier; it is better so—*Va!*"

They listened with all submission.

"My husband was so bad that I often wished myself dead; he beat me, he turned me out on the hillside twice on winter nights; he drank—at last he was never sober. We had two children; the eldest was a girl, her name was Aline. I called her Aline after Mdlle. Aline de Mabendie, the last of the old family. Aline was three years old when, in a drunken fit, her father killed her."

Nellie gave a start of horror and dismay, then looked with astonishment at Benoîte. She had told the story so often that it had become a merely mechanical narration, in fact, there was a little triumphant complacency in her voice, but no trace of emotion.

"Yes," she said. "But that was going too far; Monsieur le Curé would not absolve him from that; the drink-fever came on, and he died without the blessing of the Church; he was very bad, my children. Heaven rest his soul! Well."

Her dark eyes lit up, she was evidently coming to the interest of her story. "My second child was Jean

Marie; he was an infant at the time; emotion had tried me, I could not nourish him. I had a goat at the time with a kid. I sold the kid, and gave Jean Marie to the goat; she suckled him as her own kid, and at the sound of his cry, would come bounding in to stand over his cradle and feed him, and he throve well. Now I knew that my bad husband could only be saved by a very great effort on my part, and I vowed that I would make my boy into a priest, and that his first mass should be for his father's soul. I laboured, *mes filles*, I worked night and day; my hands are not weak yet, do you see? but once they were stronger than two women's. God helped me. Monsieur le Curé saw my purpose and educated my boy, caused him to pass into the college; he learns a great deal, my little Jean Marie. See! here are his certificates," and she drew a little bundle of papers from her pocket. "Five is the highest mark, see! Mademoiselles, all of you, come close. Divinity five, Philosophy five, Good Conduct four, and so on and so on. Monsieur le Curé says they are excellent, and now he will be ordained in three months, and a hundred francs are required for his fees, and these are wanting."

And with a fine dramatic gesture Benoîte rose to her feet, drew her cloak round her, and prepared to leave the kitchen.

"I commend the matter to *ces demoiselles*," she said. "*Au revoir.*"

"She has confidence," said Jeannette with admiration.

"She is quite right," said Amélie. "Come, courage, every one! You, Jeannette and Célestine, must also do your best. Fancy if, after all, Jean Marie should not be ordained."

"It must not be thought of," said the stout Jeannette, putting her arms a-kimbo—"if I have to resign all my economies."

"You will not refuse to undertake the *quête* now, Nelline?" said Amélie, taking the arm of her friend. "Indeed, you need have no fear. Mamma, as I said, is an accomplished *quêteuse*."

Half an hour later, Madame la Harpe, in a splendid toilette covered with black fringe, and a bonnet with ostrich feathers, started on her pious mission with Nellie by her side, looking very fair and shy in her white gown.

They went to all the principal houses in the little town, and Nellie, at first painfully shy, became more and more amused.

"It is impossible that you can refuse me, Madame," Madame la Harpe would say in one house. "You have such beautiful and amiable children, who are so especially blest in your interior!—such a good object! —ah! Monsieur, your face is the very type of the benevolent. You have never refused me before, and never, no, never have I asked for a more worthy object."

Sous, half-francs, francs, even five-franc pieces, rained upon her.

"Nellie," said Madame la Harpe, "I am dead with fatigue, I believe my bonnet to be on one side, my

face streams. Truly, when one is as fat as I am, one should limit one's piety. Stop; there is Monsieur le Marquis himself. She gave me ten francs, but he does not know that, and he might give us a trifle."

A gentleman was strolling up the street with two fat mottled pointers at his heels.

Monsieur le Marquis *en province* did not take the trouble to shave; his appearance was not improved by a three weeks' growth of irregular whiskers, his white linen dress and panama hat with a broad black ribbon spoke of the ease and comfort of elegance relaxed.

"Ah, Monsieur," cried Madame la Harpe, rapidly crossing the road with the bounding motion peculiar to her, "you are just the one whom I have been hoping to meet!"

"At your service, Madame," with a low bow, and the gentleman removed his cigarette from between his teeth.

"Monsieur, it is for a work of charity," she began.

"Ah, bah! I leave all these matters to my wife," said Monsieur le Marquis somewhat abruptly.

"We all know the charity of Madame your wife, but see, Monsieur, I should like to give you also the opportunity of doing a little something for your soul."

"Which wants it badly, *hein*, Madame?" said the Marquis, laughing.

"Of that I can be no judge until you have either refused me or given me a little donation."

"An excellent answer, Madame. So you will not accept my wife's alms as mine?"

"Come, come, though you are married fifteen years, you have not lost your individuality."

"And this young lady. Is she on the same quest?"

Madame la Harpe gave a rapid glance at Nellie, which she interpreted rightly as an entreaty for help. Monsieur le Marquis stood looking at her with his head on one side and a pair of bright little eyes glancing like jet beads. She looked up merrily.

"Monsieur, it is my first *quête*," she said. "And if I did chance to take home a gold napoleon, I should——"

"Well, what would you do?"

"I should jump for joy," said Nellie, demurely.

Madame la Harpe looked shocked, she evidently thought that Nellie's demand was excessive.

"How is one to refuse," said Monsieur le Marquis, throwing out his hands, "when wit and beauty beg?"

"And conscience enjoins," said Nellie.

"Ah, for that!" and he gave a little shrug of the shoulders. Then, opening his purse, he took out a shining napoleon, and handed it to Nellie with a profound bow.

"Now jump! jump for joy, Mademoiselle," he said.

But Nellie had become suddenly shy, and blushed rosily.

"Experience is not so charming as anticipation," he said, sharply.

"You are mistaken," answered Nellie. "I shall jump when I get home!"

"I am delighted to hear it!" And, with another salute, Monsieur le Marquis resumed his cigarette and strolled on.

"That is beyond my dreams," said Madame la Harpe. "I wonder how Amélie and my daughter-in-law have fared?"

"No one could refuse Madame Jean," said Nellie. "It would be like refusing St. Catherine herself."

"Yes, she is a very saint, my daughter-in-law," said Madame la Harpe, with a sigh. "Her vocation was always the cloister."

"Indeed!" said Nellie, eagerly. "Then why did she marry?"

"It was the will of her parents. She had a good portion, and was a very suitable *partie* for our Jean. We had no idea that her inclination was so strong a one when we arranged the marriage."

"And Monsieur Jean?"

"He never saw her till all was arranged; then he was quite satisfied; he looked upon her vocation as a childish folly that she would soon shake off, but she never will."

"Never!" said Nellie, emphatically.

At this moment the sound of *sabots* cloppeting after them in full pursuit arrested their attention, and Toinnette, the fat *bonne* from the inn, came up with them.

"Stop, stop, Madame!" she cried in Basque. "Let me tell you something. The omnibus from

Orthez has just come in, and three gentlemen have descended at the inn. I do not know whether they are to stop or to go on, when Jean Marie's horses have rested, but they are rich, and beautiful—officers! and in uniform; they are now seated on the terrace, each with a cigar, a *demi-tasse*, and cognac. I am convinced that they would give largely. It was Madame's Jeannette who sent me flying after you, ladies."

Madame la Harpe set her fringes to rights with a shake, righted her bonnet, and turned round.

"Courage, my child," she said to Nellie. "This task shall be performed by you."

"But, Madame, surely—will it be really right?"

"Your duty—and not the smallest impropriety in it! Heavens! My dear child, should *I*—*I* of all people—advise an indiscretion? Anybody may speak or converse to anybody on a *quête*, and no one ever takes advantage of it. You may meet the same individual ten minutes after, no one ventures to bow, there is no acquaintance. It is strange that you should be ignorant of this etiquette. But here we are! Why, you are quite pale, Nelline?"

"I do not like it at all, Madame," said Nellie, nervously.

They approached the narrow strip of garden bordered by terrace, belonging to the inn. At a small iron table, in the midst of a kind of arbour of untidy greenery, sat three officers, whose epaulettes and gleaming sword-belts caught the light of the now setting sun.

"Now, my child, courage."

Nellie went forward desperately—went quite forward till she stood before the three men, who all rose to their feet simultaneously.

"Messieurs," she began tremulously, and clasping her hands nervously together with a little gesture of entreaty, "if you had a little money, just a few francs, to bestow on charity!"

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed one of the gentlemen, in a tone of such unmixed astonishment that Nellie was seized with an irresistible inclination to laugh.

"It is not for myself," she said. "Indeed, it is for Benoîte."

"And who is Benoîte?" said the oldest of the party—a stout gentleman with a magnificent white moustache, pointed with mastic—with great severity.

"Benoîte has a son, and——"

"Ah, Benoîte has a son! then why, Mademoiselle, may I ask, does not Benoîte's son support his mother?"

"The young lady is an inexperienced *quêteuse, mon Général*," said one of the officers, in a low voice.

Nellie caught the words, and looked gratefully at the speaker. He was tall for a Frenchman, with a dark face and bright observing eyes, a moustache of the kind called coquettish in France, short, well-trimmed, and turned upwards at the corners with a twist, cheeks and chin of the blue tint of a dark man closely shaved.

When his eyes met hers, there was a look of unbounded admiration, mixed with some pity in them.

Old Benoîte's son cannot help her, *Monsieur le Général*," she said, with some spirit. "He is in a seminary, and is to be ordained, if, amongst us, who are the friends of his mother, enough money can be raised to pay his fees."

"*Peste!*" said the General. "I am sorry, Mademoiselle, but I can give you nothing; if I had my will, the conscription should extend to the priesthood, and every man-jack among them should serve his time. We shall not have long to wait before it is so."

Nellie made a little haughty bow and turned away, when she was again arrested by the young officer who had spoken before.

"If Mademoiselle will accept of my small contribution," he said, handing her a couple of francs, "I shall feel honoured."

Nellie took the money, saying the formal words used on each occasion by Madame la Harpe: "The good God will reward you, Monsieur"—and she was going on her way when she was startled by a shrill little cry and a rush past her.

"Etienne!"

"Mamma!"

And the young officer was in Madame la Harpe's arms, rapid kisses from each side to the other showering between them.

"You here, my son; and not come at once to me! But what does it mean?"

"Hush!" and he walked away with them out of earshot of the other officers. "I am with the General, mamma, and cannot leave him till he departs by

the diligence in half an hour. Then at once I join you. I have news for you, too, but I must not stay now. *A tantôt.*"

And he returned to his duty.

The General was smoking and saying blasphemous things, launching bad words and worse insinuations against the priests, his aide-de-camp listening with profound indifference, when Etienne la Harpe came back.

"You are of this town, *docteur*," said the General. "Who is the lovely *quêteuse ?*"

"She is a young Englishwoman, *mon Général*, staying with my mother."

"*Peste !* I envy your luck—she is beautiful as a houri."

CHAPTER IV.

"BUT who is he, Madame?" said Nellie, when her breath came back, and she and Madame la Harpe were hurrying rapidly home to prepare for the new arrival.

"Who is he? He is my Etienne, my beautiful, good youngest son. What will they all say! We did not expect to see him for another three months."

"But I had understood that your youngest son was a doctor, Madame?"

"So he is a doctor—military doctor, you know. He must have got promotion; nothing else could have brought him back so soon! Oh, la! la! how my bones do ache! To think that Etienne should be come back so soon!"

"Well, mamma! and what success have you had?" cried Amélie, meeting them at the door.

"He is come, Amélie! He has arrived with the General, and is seeing him off by the diligence at this very moment." Amélie looked bewildered.

"Come!" she said. "But is it, then, too late? Has he missed his chance for lack of the fees?"

"Missed his chance! for shame, Amélie; it means promotion, on the contrary. Oh, the joy of seeing him again!"

Amélie's hands went up in the air, her eyes opened.

"Heavens, mamma! is this delirium? And you look so hot and exhausted! What is she speaking about?" she added, leading her mother in, and appealing to Nellie; but before Nellie could reply, Jeannette came flying up to the door, the ends of her handkerchief streaming behind her head.

"But hear, Mesdames! Monsieur le docteur has come! He is here in person! Oh, the happy day!"

"Etienne?" cried Amélie.

"Etienne! Who speaks of Etienne?" and out of his room came Monsieur la Harpe in his shirt sleeves.

"Etienne is here! he but sends off the General and joins us!" said Madame la Harpe, sinking into a chair.

"Hark! the horn! the diligence goes!" cried Jeannette.

The distant note of the diligence sounded on the air, and it had hardly died away before Monsieur Etienne came clanking into view in all the splendour of full uniform. Nellie stood by watching the lavish kisses, from the first ones bestowed heartily on both the plump cheeks of "Papa," to those finally given to Jeannette, the foster-sister of Monsieur le docteur.

The warm greetings were over at last. The evening was very hot, and after dinner the whole party were glad to descend to the terrace. That evening was never effaced from Nellie's memory. They all sat grouped, the ladies with their work, the gentlemen

leaning back luxuriously. Madame Jean with her calm pale face and long black gown flitted about making glasses of syrup for Monsieur Jean and Etienne, the latter took the hand which presented the glass to him and pressed it to his lips.

"Always a ministering angel, *ma sœur*," he said, and she smiled her sweet sad smile.

Nellie was too shy to look much at the young officer, but his quick bright glances followed her every movement. She sat leaning her head on her hand, her elbow on the low parapet; the fair soft masses of her golden hair were a little disordered by the soft wind; her large blue eyes were cast down and veiled often by their thick dark lashes; the bright pink colour came and went in her cheek. Darkness stole softly down over the mountains, and deepened the shadows in the valley; the noisy dash of the river below made a sweet monotonous music.

There came a certain hush upon all the party; they felt the calm of the hour. Monsieur Jean broke the silence first; he was, as he flattered himself, too much a man of the world to be romantic.

"You have never told us what brought you back so much sooner than we expected, Etienne," he said.

"I told my mother," answered the young doctor, bending forward and patting the little fat hand of Madame la Harpe. "I have promotion. I have been offered the post of medecin-en-chef de l'hôpital militaire of A . . . Algiers!"

"*Sapristi!*" cried Monsieur Jean; "but that is a good position! a first-rate position!"

"It is!" said Etienne, leaning back and twisting the point of his moustache.

"I always said that he would go far!" said Monsieur la Harpe, rubbing his hands with a chuckle.

"Merit, skill and perseverance always succeed," said Monsieur Jean.

"With the blessing of the good God," said Madame Jean, softly. "Etienne, receive my congratulations."

"And mine, and mine," came the chorus. Nellie felt that she must add her little offering to theirs, and she said timidly, "Let me also congratulate you, Monsieur." He turned sharply round at her words with a sudden movement of *empressement.*

"You are too good, Mademoiselle," he said. He looked at her, hoping for some further speech, but she said no more.

"Yes, it is a good position, Etienne," repeated Monsieur Jean, leaning back and sipping his syrup.

"But Algiers is far from home; you will be lonely. What do you say, my father—shall we occupy ourselves with making a marriage for this famous medecin-en-chef?"

"I have thought much of it," said Madame la Harpe, gravely.

A sudden flush came over the young doctor's dark face.

"Come," he said, with a little laugh, "if you are so indiscreet as to begin such a subject before all the world, I must vanish."

"All the world!" said Monsieur la Harpe. "Why, you are in the bosom of your family."

"And as for Nelline," said Amélie, affectionately, "she is one of us."

"A dear little sister," said Madame Jean impulsively. Madame la Harpe added a sounding kiss.

Nellie laughed a little, and blushed still more, but she was touched. A contrast flashed into her mind: all this caressing, this vivacity and demonstrative words, the pretty flattery, the petting, and idle sunny life, how pleasant it was! She remembered how different it was at Holmedale, where every one was busy, where her Aunt Mary always expected her to be drawing, or singing, or working in the house, where her kiss in the morning was so calm and gentle. And Dick, how well she remembered his bitter words: "To go back would be the first reasonable thing you ever did in your life." The words had not struck her at the time, but now they came back in contrast with all the petting in the new life. Then came a little pang of self-reproach, and a vision of Dick's kind, sorrowful eyes looking down upon her with that haunting look of intense love.

"Mademoiselle, you are cold, you shiver; allow me to put this round you."

It was Etienne offering her a little shawl; in his manner the devotion of a Frenchman.

Down below, the fire-flies came out and danced their wild starry dance in the valley. Nellie had shivered, but not with cold—a strange sad feeling stole over her. Dick, faithful, noble Dick, was far away, with his young vigorous life blighted by the

cold touch of disappointment. She knew now that it must be so, and she took the shawl from Etienne la Harpe with a smile, and a little profusion of pretty French words.

Madame Jean that night came up to the bedroom occupied by Nellie and Amélie, and sat down on the window-seat while they loosened their hair Nellie's was very long, and flowed all round her down to the knees when unbound.

"You are like a fair Magdalen, my child," said Madame Jean, admiringly.

Nellie came and knelt beside her, putting her arms round her waist, "And you are lovely as Our Lady of Sorrows," she said. "Ah! why is there sorrow to hurt this beautiful, happy world?"

"Happiness is not everything, Nelline: live for anything! for love, for duty, for charity if you will, but not for happiness."

"There is nothing else for which I care to live," said Nellie, throwing back her long hair and looking up at her friend, "without it I should wish to die!"

"God help you, poor little sparkling fire-fly," said Madame Jean, tenderly, "and God help the good noble Englishman who loves you so!"

"How do you know that?" cried Nellie, starting and blushing crimson. "I do not believe it; he does not know what love is."

"Nelline! Nelline! and do you?" cried Amélie, laughing.

"I can imagine," said Nellie, hotly. "My cousin

finds fault with me—true love would think me perfection!"

Madame Jean patted her cheek. "Well, well, *mignonne*," she said, "your good friends will take care of you, you need not worry your little self about such matters. Go to bed and sleep."

CHAPTER V.

THE sunny days passed on.

"How changed is Monsieur le docteur," said Jeannette to her fellow-*bonne*. "Formerly he was out all day, now he spends all his time at home, and he is absorbed—*distrait*. He smokes less, he uses double the perfumes. What is it?"

"*Dame!* it is not difficult to see!" said Célestine, shrugging her shoulders.

"My wife," said Monsieur la Harpe, very gravely, "I have something of importance to say to you."

Madame la Harpe looked startled; it was not often that her husband originated an idea, but when he did, it was very often a good one.

"I listen, my friend!" she said.

"We need go no further in our correspondence with Monsieur and Madame Lagrange. Etienne will never marry their daughter."

"What! never marry her! a young lady with 65,000 francs! Madame Lagrange would never have given a thought to Etienne but for this excellent position he has acquired."

"No matter," said Monsieur la Harpe, "he will never marry her."

"But why, my friend?" said his wife, with sup-

pressed ire, and a lurking dread that her own suspicions might be confirmed by his answer.

"Because he has lost his heart, and set his whole affections on the little Englishwoman."

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, sinking heavily into a chair.

Monsieur la Harpe rubbed his hands. "I have been reflecting, *ma femme*," he said.

She looked up with a ray of hope—his rare reflections were apt to be good.

"I propose to say nothing to Etienne," he said, "but to write to that good Englishman myself, to see whether an arrangement could be arrived at. These Englishmen are rich; he is her nearest relative; it is for him to settle her in life; at all events, we shall hear what he has to propose. If the affair fails, it will be time enough to thwart Etienne, but I am not without hope. Hist! not a word! let us keep this little affair between ourselves."

Madame la Harpe smiled and sighed. *Mon ami*," she said, "*finesse* is required. What do you say? Shall we not break off finally the Lagrange affair, but leave both open for the time? Etienne may be in love, but he is too much a man of the world to let that interfere with a business arrangement such as marriage."

"It is possible!" said Monsieur la Harpe, "but God forbid that we should have another child with eyes like those of Jean's wife!"

"Bah! men are made of quite another paste," said Madame la Harpe.

Monsieur la Harpe went to the window, and by a jerk at the string of the *persiennes* enabled himself to see out.

"Look, *ma bonne*," he said. "Judge for yourself."

The young people were all on the terrace, Amélie and Madame Jean seated, and both embroidering, Nellie filling a large earthenware pot with a huge wild bouquet of sweet roses; by her side stood Doctor Etienne, in his attitude, the turn of head, pose, everything, the look of *empressement* almost peculiar to a Frenchman. He seemed to be speaking very earnestly, for they saw Nellie suddenly pause and look up at him, her eyes met his, and suddenly the bright pink colour flushed her fair little face; she seemed to hesitate, then shyly took up a little rose and handed it to him. He pressed it to his lips with passion, and Nellie, gathering up all that remained of her flowers into her gown, went hastily over to Madame Jean, and knelt down beside her.

"Oh, la! la!" exclaimed Madame la Harpe.

"Am I, or am I not a man of penetration?" said her husband, smiting his breast. "I go in, I write."

Far away in sunny Berkshire, one sweet fresh evening of the English summer, Dick Gordon and his mother sat in the garden under rustling linden trees, when a large and important-looking letter with a foreign post-mark was put into his hand.

"From Nellie, Dick?" said Mrs. Gordon.

"No! but from Sauveterre all the same." He glanced at the signature.

"From the old father; how odd! What can he have to say?"

"Nellie has not written for some time," said Mrs. Gordon, looking rather wistfully at her son.

He did not answer; he was reading the letter, and though a fair French scholar, the small neat handwriting seemed not quite easy to decipher.

Dick read it quite through, then without a word of comment he handed it to his mother.

"Mother, the evening is fine, I am going for a long walk," he said. She thought that there was something a little odd in his voice, but before she could speak, he was gone; she heard his footsteps crunching the gravel, then a hollow sound as he crossed the rustic bridge over the little river, and he was gone.

The tears rose to Mrs. Gordon's eyes, but she brushed them quickly away, put on her spectacles and read the letter:

"MY DEAR MONSIEUR,—

"You may recollect that at the time of the interview I had the honour to have with you, I undertook to watch over and take care of your charming young cousin as a child of my own: at that time neither I nor my wife could foresee how much her amiable character, her beauty, her freshness, and her piety would endear her to us all. You have doubtless heard from Mademoiselle Nellie of the arrival at Sauveterre of my second son, Etienne, medecin-en-chef de l'hôpital militaire de A. . . . en Alger. This

grade he has recently attained: it is a fine position, especially when acquired at so young an age; my son is twenty-four years of age. His mother and myself, before consigning him to so distant a station, are anxious to marry him, and already a very desirable alliance has presented itself. But youth will be youth. My son has become madly in love with Mademoiselle your cousin. It is with difficulty I write, terrified lest you should perceive in me the smallest absence of delicacy when I venture to say that Mademoiselle Nellie, with every discretion, yet appears favourably inclined towards him. You are aware, my dear Monsieur, that these things are affairs of business. I, therefore, venture to ask whether any arrangements could be made, so as to avoid the sacrifice of these youthful and interesting sentiments. My son, with an income from his appointment of 12,500 francs a year, enjoys also the interest of the sum that he will inherit at my death, namely 100,000 francs. You will naturally understand that when a man has a competence so comfortable to offer, that his parents hope for some reciprocity in choosing a wife for him. With the assurance of my profoundly distinguished sentiments, I am,

"JEAN MARIE ETIENNE LA HARPE."

Mrs. Gordon laid down the letter with a little gasp. "My poor boy!" she said to herself.

The air blew chilly through the trees. She drew her shawl round her, shivered, and went indoors.

She could not go to bed or rest. She waited in her room, as the slow hours struck one after another, till she heard Dick's step on the stairs—a slow, heavy step, as of a tired man. She slipped out into the passage, and met him at the door of his room.

"Good-night, mother," he said, kissing her very affectionately. "Good-night, dear mother."

That was all that was ever said between them to betray poor Dick's buried hopes.

CHAPTER VI.

MONSIEUR and Madame la Harpe awaited with ill-concealed impatience the answer to his letter. Things were not quite easy to manage. The Lagrange family were beginning to dislike the procrastination and indecision of the La Harpes' proceedings. It was even intimated that before the week was over, Madame Lagrange would arrive in Sauveterre, and this idea was by no means agreeable to the La Harpes.

But, on the first day that an answer from England could have been reasonably expected, it came.

Monsieur La Harpe and his wife, both quite tremulous with excitement, had a little mild contention as to who should break the seal, in which the lady prevailed.

"Heavens! what writing!" she exclaimed.

"Colossal, but legible," said Monsieur la Harpe, and he slowly read as follows:

"MY DEAR SIR,—

"My cousin will have a fortune of 125,000 francs. But, before finally consenting to such a marriage, as you do me the honour to propose, I should prefer making the acquaintance of Docteur

la Harpe. I propose, therefore, to arrive in Sauveterre the day after your receipt of this letter.

"Yours, etc."

"Most satisfactory," said Monsieur La Harpe, complacently. "It more than doubles Etienne's fortune."

"Yes," said Madame la Harpe, gloomily. "It is delightful, but oh, *mon ami*, if he should not arrive before Madame Lagrange!"

Monsieur la Harpe shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us not anticipate misfortunes," he said. "And now to tell Etienne."

He opened the door and called his son. The young doctor came in twirling his moustaches, with defiance in his face.

Monsieur la Harpe was seated pompously, his hands spread on his ample tartan waistcoat.

"My son," he began, "on the subject of your marriage."

"Papa," said the young man, firmly, "my affections are engaged. It is with infinite pain, but without hesitation, that I am obliged to refuse the proffered alliance."

"Sir! Your affections are engaged!" cried Monsieur la Harpe, indignation in his tone, a twinkle in his eye.

"Irrevocably," was the answer, in a voice of despondency.

"And may I ask the name of the young lady?"

"Need you ask?" said Etienne, throwing out both

his hands. "When you yourself have presented me to her under your own roof. *Sapristi!* one has eyes."

"Is it Nellie Grey?"

"Ah, Papa!"

"My son; I bestow her upon you!"

A little cry of astonishment, then Etienne threw himself into his father's arms and kissed him on both cheeks, immediately repeating the little scene with his mother.

They showed him Dick Gordon's letter, of which he approved highly, and he readily agreed to his parents' suggestion—that not a word should be said to Nellie until after her cousin's arrival.

The next day Madame la Harpe, having quite forgotten that Nellie Grey was still ignorant of her cousin's proposed visit, spoke of it in the middle of the twelve o'clock breakfast.

"Nellie," she said, "we shall hear the horn of the diligence about five o'clock, and Monsieur, your cousin, is sure to come by it."

"My cousin coming?" cried Nellie, very much startled. "Indeed, Madame?"

"Ah! I ought to have told you, *mignonne*. Yes; he has consented to come at last, and pay us a little visit."

"We shall be delighted to see him," said Madame Jean, kindly.

Nellie did not quite know what to say. Her cheeks burned, her head throbbed, so various and conflicting were the feelings the news awakened in her.

Docteur la Harpe, seeing her confusion, was seized with a fit of jealousy, and went away for the whole afternoon fishing in the Gave.

"One would imagine you were not altogether pleased to see your cousin, Nellie," said Madame Jean, a little sadly.

"I don't know," said Nellie, pushing her hair away from her temples with rather a bewildered look. "I cannot tell whether I am or not."

"But why, *mignonne*? He is so good and kind, and so fond of his little cousin? Why, what is it, child?"

For Nellie had suddenly put her arms round her, and burst into tears.

"It is nothing," she said, drying her tears, but with a catch in her voice. "Only I am angry with myself. We were so happy and peaceful, every day succeeded each other with so much that was delightful. I am a little sorry that any change should come."

"And you think that your good, loving cousin's arrival will interrupt this happy state of things?" said Madame Jean, a little severely.

"No, no! I don't know what I mean. Do not think badly of me! But Dick finds fault with me."

"He loves you dearly."

"Yes, yes! Don't you understand? A great deal too much. I am not good enough! It oppresses me."

There was petulance in her voice. Madame Jean

understood all. She wiped away the tears with her handkerchief.

"Well, don't cry any more, *mignonne*, or he will think we do not make you happy."

"Oh! he can never think that," cried Nellie, startled.

"I don't see how he can think otherwise, my child, if you meet him with red eyes and a little red nose."

"I will run up for some rose-water."

Madame Jean looked after her as she ran away, with a smile and a little sigh.

"I hope the poor, brave, good Englishman will not take it too much to heart," she said to herself.

Dick Gordon arrived duly by the diligence. He went first to the inn, to make some improvement in his appearance, as he had travelled day and night, but before seven o'clock he arrived at the Maison de Mabendie, and found the whole party just rising from table.

It was exceedingly hot. The gentlemen were clad in white linen from head to foot.

Nellie put out a very cold little hand to meet her cousin, and hardly ventured to look up at him; but when she did so, she gave a little start.

"Oh, Dick! Dick! Have you been ill?"

"No, Nellie; certainly not. What makes you think so?"

"You are so changed."

Dick's face had grown very thin, which made his eyes look much larger, and a great deal of his brown,

ruddy colour was gone, and his expression was much graver, firmer, and older.

"I do not think I can be more changed than you are, Nellie," he said.

"Am I changed?" she said, a little coquettishly, conscious of trained curls on her brow instead of the old natural silky waviness, and of considerable alterations in dress.

"Yes, very much; you look older and more sedate, and you have become quite a little Frenchwoman."

Nellie had half expected a compliment, and missed it. She gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

In the evening Dick Gordon and the two parents had an interview: it was almost, but not quite, satisfactory. If Nellie should consent to this marriage, her cousin would settle five thousand pounds on her; but the money was to remain in England, in securities chosen by himself, and in the hands of trustees. Monsieur la Harpe would have preferred that his son should have the sole command of the money; but Dick was inexorable, and, after all, as the old gentleman said, "Nowhere could it be in safer hands than in those of this most amiable of cousins."

It was proposed that Dick should speak to Nellie the following morning. He shrunk from the duty, and even proposed that the young doctor should be permitted to plead his cause; but this idea was received with such horror, that Dick perceived himself to have been guilty of an indiscretion of some enormity, and, inwardly chafing against all this non-

sense, as he deemed it, he consented. The opportunity came immediately after breakfast. Dick stopped Nellie as she was following Amélie out of the room,

"Nellie, dear, I want to speak to you," he said, gently.

She became rather pale, but came obediently back into the dining-room.

"They will be coming to take away the things," said Dick, nervously. "Can't we go somewhere where we shall not be disturbed?"

Nellie did not speak, but led the way into a small unused salon. Dick walked to the window, and began to speak with his back to her.

"Nellie," he said, "I have something very important to say to you, and I don't know how to begin. You see, in England a man proposes for himself, but here it is different. Monsieur and Madame la Harpe have asked me to speak to you about Doctor Etienne."

"Ah!"

Dick turned round abruptly. Nellie was standing with her hands straight down before her, clasped tightly, her face raised, her fresh lips parted, and a glowing, tender light in the blue eyes upraised and fixed on vacancy, that he had never seen before.

His head sank on his breast.

"I think I need not ask," he said, gently, "what your answer will be. Will you marry him, Nellie?"

"Yes."

The word was hardly breathed.

Dick turned away for a moment, passed his hand quickly over his face, then came forward abruptly and took her hand.

"Nellie," he said, his lips quivering in spite of every effort, "you are very young; I stand in the position of brother, or even of father, to you. Let me ask you to consider. Etienne la Harpe is a good, honest, well-conducted man."

The words seemed to jar upon Nellie. She drew her hand away.

"No; hear me, dear," he said, gravely. "To marry him, you must resign your country, your home, all the habits of your youth—indeed, even your old friends."

"All this is nothing," she said.

Dick turned away, this time bitterly wounded, but he would not show it. He smiled bravely and said, "I have certainly said enough, Nellie, and Doctor Etienne may now plead his own cause. I will go and tell him."

She put her hands on his arm and looked up at him.

"Before you go, Dick," she said, "say, 'God bless you, Nellie!'"

"God bless you, my own little sister."

"And you—you don't mind, do you? You know," falteringly, "you always found fault with me."

"Well, Nellie, never again! I have resigned all my right to do so. But did I? I don't think I did. But let me go."

Dick went downstairs. He said two words to

Doctor Etienne, who dashed upstairs three steps at a time; then he took his hat and went out.

Madame Jean passed him, and caught a glimpse of his white, set face. "Ah, *mon Dieu*," she sighed, "the world is very sad."

But there were two upstairs who did not think so.

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the few weeks of preparation before the wedding, Dick Gordon went away, travelling to Pau and Biarritz, then over the mountains into Spain. He stayed away till the very day before the marriage.

The ladies had often bewailed the shortness of the time, but Etienne must go to Algiers to begin his new duties, and *modistes* and *lingères* must be hastened accordingly.

Dick Gordon gave his cousin two hundred pounds for her trousseau, and the result was charming.

On the very day on which Etienne and Nellie were married, old Benoîte's son was ordained.

"A good omen!" said Madame Jean.

The last moment came, all must separate; bride and bridegroom bound to their far-distant home; Dick back to England, with a weary weight of chill disappointment on his young heart; Madame Jean, strong to suffer and strong to pray, left at Sauveterre.

There were tears and sobs and kisses.

Doctor Etienne twisted his moustaches and looked on.

"Take care of her," said Dick, his warm grasp hurting the young Frenchman's delicate hand.

"That is the affair as much of my honour as of

my heart," he answered, and embraced Dick on both cheeks.

Nellie leant forward in the carriage as they drove away, watching till the very last. A little tiny pang stole across her even then. Dick was nearly a head taller than Etienne, or any man there. "It is all very well," she said to herself, a little impatiently, "but poor dear Dick puts everyone out of proportion."

Dick Gordon went home. He found his mother waiting for him at the door.

"Well, mother dear," he said, "I have married her."

"My dear Dick, what?"

He gave an odd little laugh.

"I have become so used to French ways," he said; "I have married her to Doctor la Harpe."

"I hope she will live to repent it," said Mrs. Gordon, a hot, burning feeling rising in her breast against the girl who had brought the shadow on her son's life.

"God forbid!" said Dick, hastily.

UNCLE GEORGE'S WILL.

CHAPTER I.

"BUT, Mamma, it is impossible!"

"But, Mollie, it is not only possible, but it is a fact!"

"Mamma, I don't believe it!"

"Very well, then look at your uncle's letter yourself," and Lady Mary Houghton tossed a closely-written letter across the breakfast-table to her daughter.

Mollie picked up the letter gingerly with the tips of her fingers.

"It won't bite," said her mother, irritably.

"I don't feel at all sure about that, Mamma. If it was Uncle Edward himself, it would."

"Nonsense!"

Mollie, with a deep frown upon her pretty white forehead, began to read.

"I am glad poor Uncle George has left something to Meta and Agnes," she said. "At least there is some good in his will."

"Five thousand to each of my married daughters," said Lady Mary, complacently. "Yes, it will gratify

your brothers-in-law; and I am sure Meta will want it, if she goes on having two babies regularly every year."

"If they are all as pretty as the last four, I wish she might have three a year," said Mollie, lightly. "I never saw such a set of little ducks!"

"Of course, you like them, who have none of the trouble and responsibility, you little goose."

"Not to speak of the natural affinity between ducks and geese," said Mollie, gravely—her poor little face becoming more and more disconsolate. "And five thousand to you, Mamma, that is nice! and I see nothing about me. You were hoaxing, after all, Mammie dear! I am so thankful."

"Mollie, when you have a little more experience, you will know that the residue is always at the end."

"Oh, but if it is only the residue——" she cried, hopefully.

"Only the residue! but that is the bulk!"

"Oh, dear!" cried Mollie. "I thought the residue meant the fag end, and the bulk the capacious middle, and——"

"You are incorrigible!" said Lady Mary, drawing her chair from the breakfast-table, and warming her feet by the fire. "Come and sit by the fire, and if I can, I will explain it all to you. The residue of your uncle's fortune amounts to two hundred thousand pounds, and this is left to you absolutely, but on one condition——"

"And that condition is the impossible thing that I can't believe."

"And that condition is," went on Lady Mary, without taking the smallest notice of the interruption, "that you marry your cousin, Stephen Charles Algernon Houghton."

"Was there ever such a name!" cried Mollie.

"And if you refuse to marry him, or marry anyone else, then all this money is to go to a nasty hospital. I never heard of such a thing!" cried Lady Mary, in a burst of indignation.

"It is the most abominable, dreadful, wicked, and intolerable will that ever was made," said Mollie. "And, oh! to think that poor dear good Uncle George should have imagined such iniquity."

"Granted that it is all you say, Mollie!" said her mother, severely, "remember that you have got to do it."

"Mamma!" cried Mollie, in a tone of such amazed horror that Lady Mary, in spite of herself, could not help laughing.

"Oh, Mollie, Mollie, of course you must—don't you see it? You can't ruin this poor young man's prospects—you can't condemn him to beggary. I must appeal to your better side."

"No, no, no!" cried Mollie, shutting her ears with her fingers. "I won't have my better side appealed to! Yes, I will though," very suddenly. "Of course, my better side is all for the hospital—of course, I could not think of thwarting Uncle George's philanthropic intentions, certainly not! I am not so bad as that, Mamma."

"You are silly this morning," said Lady Mary,

"and are taken by surprise also, so I will make allowances for your silliness. Hospital, indeed! I never did approve of pauperizing the people, and——"

"Good morning, Mamma," cried two bright young voices, and the two married daughters came in together.

"Aggie wanted to go to Marshall and Snelgrove's, and I wanted to take her, so I picked her up in Brook Street, and we have come in on the way, to hear if you have heard from Uncle Edward."

"Yes," said her mother. "I have. Ring the bell, Mollie, for more coffee. What will you have, dear?"

"I should like something—I am awfully hungry," said Meta, undoing her fur hat. "I breakfasted at half-past seven with Tom, who has gone into Hertfordshire for a shoot. Is that muffin? quick, Mollie. But how late you are! What time did you go to bed?"

"Nine o'clock," said Mollie, absently. "There is nowhere to go now, so we went to bed. Mamma and I are always late in the morning when we go to bed early."

"Oh, do be quiet," said Agnes. "You do chatter so; and I am dying to know about the will."

"He has left each of you girls——"

"What? Quick, Mamma!"

"Five thousand."

"Oh!" Meta jumped up, and executed an animated *pas seul* in the middle of the room.

"He is an intense old brick!" she cried.

"He isn't," said Mollie, mournfully.

"He is, you minx. I shall send Tom a telegram, I think, very carefully worded."

"It is very nice," said Aggie, more sedately. "Go on, Mamma."

"He leaves the big silver dinner-service, and all the Houghtonleigh plate to your brother Charles. It will be very useful to him at Marchlands. Five thousand to me."

"And nothing to the Indian cousin?" asked Meta. "Everyone said that he was sure to have the bulk."

Lady Mary glanced at Mollie, who gave a little bound in her chair.

"You talk about what you do not understand, Meta," she said, flushing scarlet. "A will is like a merino sheep—all its value is in its tail."

"What does the child mean? Go on, Mamma."

"The residue of the property is left to Mollie on one condition."

"Oh!" cried both again, "my dear Mollie, how magnificent! How much?"

"Two hundred thousand."

"And Mollie is to have it all?"

"Not a sixpence," said Mollie, dolefully. "It is a snare and a delusion, a mirage which no earthly traveller can reach, an apple of Sodom which turns to ashes at our lips. It is all left to found a hospital!"

"Mollie," said her mother, indignantly, "I did not bring you up to tell positive black fibs."

"'*A lie that is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies*,'"

said Mollie, unable to resist the quotation.

"Oh, how you chatter!" said Agnes. "Do tell us the whole thing, Mamma, and don't let Mollie interrupt every moment."

"Be quiet, Mollie! The money is left to her on condition that she marries the Indian cousin, Stephen Houghton, and if she does not marry him it is all to go to found a hospital."

"So Mollie is provided with a fortune and a husband without the trouble of waiting for either," said Meta, pouring out some coffee. "I congratulate you, Poll."

"I won't be congratulated! There is nothing to congratulate me about."

"My dear little child," said Aggie, soothingly, "don't say things now that you will be sorry for afterwards. You would not do such an immoral thing as deprive Stephen of his patrimony."

"I should do worse if I were to consent to marry the creature—without——"

"Without what?" said her mother, coldly.

"She means love, Mamma," said Meta. "With an utter disregard for the fact that love is an exploded idea, and that nothing is of the smallest consequence except an adequate settlement."

"And a virtuous esteem," put in Aggie. "Don't be childish, Mollie; you have that already for the worthy Stephen, and there is always a chance that such a beginning may ripen into a warmer sentiment."

"Certainly, Mollie," said Meta, whose young husband had fallen in love with her at first sight, and

stoutly maintained that she had done likewise. Their love-affairs had been highly satisfactory.

"Well, what is to be done?" said Agnes. "There is always a next move to everything; what is it to be?"

"I really have not had a moment in which to think," said Lady Mary, ruefully. "What with Mollie's high-flown nonsense, and your talk, my dear girls, I have not been able to collect my thoughts; and there is a letter from your Aunt Jane I have not even opened yet."

"Ah, that is sure to contain some suggestion of value," cried Meta. "Open it at once, Mamma, and let us hear it. Aunt Jennie is always the cleverest of the whole lot."

Lady Mary opened the letter, and her three daughters gathered all round to read it over her shoulder, Meta holding a corner of it to bring it more within the vision of her rather short-sighted eyes. They read as follows:

"MY DEAR MARY,—

"Now there must be no nonsense about this matter. I cannot hear two words about it. Of course I can't have poor dear Johnnie's son denuded of his own lawful property for the sake of any romantic trash a silly chit may take into her head."

"How you catch it, Poll!" said Meta.

"Sh—go on."

"Please to impress this at once upon Mollie. I

expect her cousin here on Tuesday, the eighteenth of next month; he will spend some time with me, and matters shall then be finally arranged as to fitting times and seasons."

"I dare say!" said Mollie, indignantly.

"Hush—sh!"

"So, dear Mary, pack up Miss Mollie at once, without any unnecessary delay. You can go and stay with Charles at Marchlands, it will do you all good; and I will undertake Mollie's affairs. She does not leave this house until she has made up her mind to be a reasonable woman. As to love, I do not think any daughter of yours could be so irrational as for one moment to consider it worthy of consideration when a plain duty is involved."

"Oh yes, I see my duty," said Mollie with a gasp. "There is such a want of hospitals, and this one——"

"My dear Mollie, what on earth do you mean?"

"I won't go to Aunt Jennie's."

"Yes, you will," said her mother.

"Oh yes, darling, of course you will," said her sisters.

"But I am not going."

"Mamma," said Meta, "we are going to Marshall and Snelgrove's. Do you want anything for Mollie for this visit? has she got anything in the world to wear?"

"I have got all my season gowns."

"All Londony, and smelling of smoke. Oh,

please, Mamma," cried Meta, "let me get her one or two really killing gets-up. Nothing is worn now but tailor-made, and she has got such a nice round, soft little figure."

"Very well, only you must let me have some little choice in the matter. I should like her to look her best."

"Naturally," said Aggie, significantly.

"But I won't look my best, if you mean that—that——"

"Yes, that—that!—— Come, Poll, be reasonable, and I will make you a real duck."

"Turkey twill quilted eider-down, so fitted for an æsthetic figure like mine," said Mollie, hysterically.

"The brougham is at the door, my lady."

"There, I must not keep the horses waiting. Quick, Mollie, get your hat."

Mollie ran upstairs.

Lady Mary began giving hurried directions, and had not finished before she reappeared.

"Cloth, Meta, mind, and made to fit thoroughly, and moderate buttons—yours were too large; and patterns for the evening."

"All right, Mamma. Come, Aggie, Marshall is selling off, and I mean to buy half the shop at half price."

CHAPTER II.

"Prit-ty, prit-ty Polly Ho-opkins,
How do you do-o?—How do you do-o?"

"READY, Poll? How much longer do you mean to keep a fellow waiting?"

"Mamma," said Mollie, "there is Tom downstairs shrieking for me already, and I wanted to say so many things about——"

"Mol-lie!" from below.

"You must not keep him waiting, dear, when he is ready to take you to the station. I really think you have said all that there can be to say. If you only knew how tired I am of hearing you say the same thing over and over again."

"But, Mamma," cried Mollie, trying very hard to suppress her tears, "I won't do it, Mamma, you know."

"Mol-lie!"

She stamped her little foot.

"My dear little girl, you will lose the train. Give my best love to Aunt Jane, and tell her to write to me at Marchlands."

"Oh, Mamma, I——"

"Nonsense, child, you have got three weeks to

enjoy Aunt Jennie before Stephen comes, so think no more about it."

"I shall come back on the seventeenth, Mamma; that is quite decided."

"Mol-lie! ten-forty!"

"My dear, do go."

"Good-bye, Mamma, till the seventeenth. I shall go to Marchlands if you are not here."

But Tom would wait no longer, he dashed up the stairs five steps at a time.

"You'll be late for the train, you perverse young person, you! Now do come."

With one more hasty kiss Mollie ran downstairs.

Meta was waiting to take her to the station with the four children in the carriage. Tom jumped into a hansom and they were off.

"You look charming, my dear, quite charming!" said her sister. "If only Stephen——"

"Oh, Mettie," cried Mollie in an agony. "If you knew how like pins and needles, and mustard and peppercorns, his horrid name is to me, you would forbear."

"I forbear," she answered, laughing. "Here we are at Paddington, and Tom gesticulating frantically."

"Bell rung! quick, quick!"

They had to run up the platform, as fast as it was possible to run, to the carriage where Mollie's anxious maid was leaning out of the window, white with suspense.

The train was just starting. Mollie put out her pretty head.

"Good-bye, Tom; tell Meta I won't—won't——"

"Refuse?" shouted Tom. "That is right, dear! that's right!" waving his hand—and Mollie was borne off with a horrible doubt in her mind as to whether he had only pretended to hear wrong or not.

However, she settled down in her corner of the carriage with one of the immortal "Chronicles of Carlingford" to read, and was very comfortable.

At one o'clock hunger overpowered prudence, which would have suggested a later hour for luncheon, and Mollie ate all her sandwiches.

She regretted this when five o'clock tea-time came and passed—but regrets were useless. Not until seven o'clock did she reach her destination, and even then there were twenty minutes of warm brougham and fur rug between her and Lady Jane's house, Holliwell.

All things come to an end. Just as they were arriving, her maid suddenly exclaimed:

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss, but Sir Thomas gave me this for you, and I quite forgot it."

"This" was an ornamental box of French bonbons. Mollie was touched, and said, "Dear old Tom!" under her breath, and wished she had had them sooner—they might have helped to fill up the gap at five o'clock, and now it was nearly dinner-time.

The carriage drew up, a hospitable light streamed from the hall-door, and in two seconds Mollie found herself in the arms of her aunt, in front of a fire large enough to roast an ox whole.

"My dear child," said Aunt Jane, kissing her again and again, "I am so glad to see you, and you are looking so pretty!"

It was a very proper boudoir in which they met, the paper Morris's darkest sage-green, the chimney-piece painted to match; the whole room full of screens, many embroidered sunflowers, many scanty-leaved irises.

A large sofa was drawn up near the fire, on which lay Lady Jane's only daughter, Gwendoline, the owner of the boudoir, and alas! an invalid. Had she been bright with health she would have been a very pretty woman; as she was, there was something very sweet in the delicate face.

"How are you? Cousin Gwendoline," said Mollie, stooping to kiss her cousin affectionately. "I do so hope that you are better."

"I am very well for me," was the cheery answer. "Are you cold, Mollie? Mamma, bring her close to the fire."

"Oh no, thank you," said Mollie, who, coming in from the frosty air, was stifling. "I am as warm as a toast, indeed."

"How nice to be quite warm in such weather!" said Gwendoline, with a little shiver.

It was too late for tea, so Mollie was taken up to her room to dress and rest before dinner, and there Aunt Jane could say nothing to her, because her maid was getting out her things as quickly as she could, so Mollie felt thankful that the evil moment was put off.

"Did you hear whether anybody was staying here, Burton?" she asked, as soon as the door had closed upon her aunt.

"Yes, Miss; your grandmamma is here—no ladies but her ladyship—and Captain Houghton."

"Oh!" said Mollie. She wondered who Captain Houghton was, then suddenly remembered with a horrible qualm that some one had once said that Stephen was a captain.

"Impossible," she said to herself, half-rising from her chair. "Her aunt would never be guilty of such a piece of treachery as that!" Her cheeks burned so much at the very idea that she wondered how she should ever get them cool for dinner.

Meanwhile, an odd conversation was going on in the drawing-room downstairs. Gwendoline, in her long pale gown, her wraps of elaborate crewel-work, had been carried upstairs; and Lady Jane, in a most comfortable and becoming *peignoir* of crimson plush, had taken her place on the sofa. In front of her, standing with his back to the fire, stood a very tall and very handsome specimen of the Houghton family. Lady Jane found herself in a somewhat embarrassing position. It had never even entered her head that the most natural thing in the world would occur, namely, that her favourite nephew, on hearing of his uncle's will, would immediately run down to Hollywell to talk it over with her. He had arrived without warning that afternoon.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie," she said, "I little thought that you were so utterly destitute of common sense."

"My dear aunt, I can't for the life of me see what common sense has got to do with it. I am not going to sell myself for money."

"But, you see, there is the poor child to consider; one must not be selfish, my dear boy."

"I understand that she has already some small fortune," he said, hastily. "And if, as you say, she is so pretty, she is quite sure to marry."

"Two hundred a year," said his aunt. "It has sufficed hitherto for her clothes. Oh, yes, I dare say she will marry, because she is more than pretty, she is quite lovely. I think she is far the prettiest of my sister's daughters, and they are all handsome. Meta and Agnes both married the very moment they came out, and extremely well, too."

"How many are there?"

"Five altogether, Charles, Agnes, Meta, Amelia, Mollie, and Algy."

"That makes six," said he, suspiciously.

"I dare say, my dear," said Lady Jane, who was thinking of something else. But the words had hardly passed her lips before a sudden idea came into her head. Why not make use of this mistake? Was it not an especial dispensation of Providence? It was just possible that by a very little dexterity a meeting without prejudice might be managed between the two perverse cousins. She kept her presence of mind wonderfully.

"Are they dark or fair? I can't endure dark girls."

"I am very sorry to hear that," said she.

"Ah, yes, of course; then Amelia is dark?—I

was sure of that. I never heard you rave about any one fair yet."

"You are more perverse than anybody I ever met," said his aunt. "Well, my dear, on the eighteenth of next month you will meet each other here, and will be able to judge for yourselves. I hope to find you in a better frame of mind. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for even thinking of absolutely cheating this poor little girl out of the fortune your poor Uncle George most certainly meant for her."

"My conscience is clear," he said, laughing. "If she had been perfectly hideous, this Amelia Houghton, then indeed I might have felt bound; but, as it is——"

"My dear, money is a very nice and comfortable thing, not at all to be despised."

"No; I quite agree with you; nobody has a keener appreciation of that than myself," said the young man, with a laugh and a sigh; "I wish it came into one's pockets more easily."

"I did not tell you that little Mollie Houghton came to-day," said Lady Jane, rising and poking the fire. Charlie Houghton started violently.

"What? But you said the eighteenth? You do not mean to say that——"

"Mollie, Mollie," said his aunt, a little impatiently. "Never mind the eighteenth. This is Mollie, the little fair one. You see, you have been away so long that you know nothing about your cousins—this is the youngest; she came out last season."

"Lawful name, Mary, I presume. Pretty?"

"Hum. But you must judge for yourself. She is a good little thing, and very clever and quick. Now remember, I must have no flirting, it would not be fair before the eighteenth."

"I ought to have told you, Aunt Jennie," said Captain Houghton, twisting his moustache, "that I am afraid my leave will be up by that time, and that I shall have to rejoin."

"Nonsense," said Aunt Jennie, as she left the room. Lady Jane went upstairs to bring Mollie down when the gong sounded. She put her arm round her waist, and said:

"My dear, I shall have a great deal to say to you, but we will put it off until nearer the eighteenth, and meanwhile you must make yourself as happy as you can. There is no one here but your cousin Charlie Houghton, whom you do not know—one of the Indian Houghtons, you know—and grandmamma."

Mollie's heart gave a great throb of delight. It was all right then, and the dreaded Captain Houghton was a Charlie, not a Stephen.

CHAPTER III.

IT was all very well for Lady Jane to wear comfortable crimson plush in the delicious hour before dinner, when the severest etiquette relaxes, and the comfortable reigns supreme. The next morning all appeared in the rigorous mourning necessitated by the death of the old bachelor great-uncle who had made so extraordinary a will.

Mollie's little black gown fitted her like a riding-habit, was short and business-like, her pretty white frills fastened by a pearl stud. "Nothing is worn in the country that is not tailor-made," Meta had declared, and certainly the result was very pretty and natty. Mollie's hair was a mass of golden puffiness on the top of her well-shaped head, and a great golden knot behind; her skin was like cream and roses, her blue eyes dancing with light and fun.

Tom Grey called her "stunning;" her brother Algy pronounced her "A 1;" and her more severe brother-in-law, Colonel Stewart, said that "she was very like Aggie."

Breakfast was a very cosy meal at Holliwell. The papers and letters were always on a big buhl table

in the window, and these were opened without ceremony during the process of eating. Moreover, the room was full of steaming machinery—a machine made coffee; a silver saucepan kept on boiling milk; the eggs had a machine to themselves; another slowly turned hot toast before the fire. Aunt Jane had a passion for comfortable machinery.

Three letters and two packets were waiting for Mollie.

"My dear," said Lady Jane, holding up her hands, "if you are a good correspondent, I wash my hands of you."

"Oh, no, Auntie," answered Mollie. "If on this earth there is an occupation that is abhorrent to my very soul, it is letter-writing. These are from mamma, and Meta, and Aggie."

"All of whom you left yesterday."

"Yes, but they must have had an object in writing; they never write without, they hate it as much as I do. Yes! they had an object, and a very jolly one," she exclaimed, glancing through her letters. "Meta has sent me a set of Danish silver ornaments, and Aggie an old silver belt. Oh what ducks they are!"

"Open them quickly," said Aunt Jennie, who loved pretty things.

"Will you give me those packets, Charlie?" said Mollie.

Both Captain Houghton and Lady Jane gave a little jump. Mollie saw it, and grew crimson to the roots of her hair. "We are cousins," she said a little

defiantly. "And I always call my cousins by their Christian names."

"Of course, of course," said Charlie hastily. "It is very nice of you, Mollie."

"Ah, but that is quite a different thing," said Mollie. "You are only a man and I am a woman."

"I always call my cousins by their Christian names," said Charlie, cutting open the strings of Mollie's parcels.

"Hoist with your own petard!" said Lady Jane, laughing. "Quick, Mollie, let me see! It seems to me that Meta and Aggie are sisters worth having."

"We all think there is nobody like each other in the whole world," said Mollie.

"An excellent sentiment for home use," said Captain Houghton, laughing.

"How pretty they are! how charming!" cried Mollie. "Oh you dears, how I wish I could kiss you!" and she blew two kisses away from her finger-tips.

"Please don't put them on," said her cousin hastily.

"Why not? Of course I shall put them on."

"No, don't! you will only spoil the effect."

"What effect? Auntie, fasten them for me."

"Charlie is right, Mollie, they will look best in the evening; your gown is too severe for such trifling: those delicate little silver chains are out of character."

"Please keep them for the evening."

Mollie was very reluctant to obey, but was just going to yield, when she uttered a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, Auntie, what is happening? Good gracious! what is it?"

Something awful was happening to the coffee machine: it was puffing excitedly, heaving itself up, while convulsive movements shook its frame.

"Heavens! Charlie, do something! What is the matter? Take off the lid. Something is fatally wrong."

But the lid was only a detail, and too late to give relief Captain Houghton rushed round to the other side.

"It burns so awfully," he said, shaking his fingers, and dancing with pain.

"It is no moment for amateurs," cried Mollie. "Immediate professional advice is absolutely essential," and she pulled the bell frantically.

"Why can't you do something, Charlie? Anything!" cried Lady Jane with a frenzied stamp.

The noises increased in violence every moment. In desperation Captain Houghton caught up a table-napkin, threw it round the gasping machine, and carrying it out into the passage, deposited it on the floor.

He had scarcely returned when a loud explosion took place outside, followed by an ominous rushing sound.

"It is all over," said he in a funereal voice.

Mollie sat down and laughed till the tears rolled down her face.

"It is no laughing matter," cried Aunt Jennie. "I wonder what was wrong with the thing. What

was it, Peters?" she asked of the butler when he had reached the scene of action. She was of course informed that it was nothing but the accidental shutting of an all-important though minute safety-valve.

"I knew it could be nothing wrong with the thing itself, and you really might have known," looking wrathfully at Charlie, who was occupied looking pitifully at the burnt tips of his fingers.

"I am very sorry, Aunt Jennie," he began, but started nervously and stopped, for a strange bubbling began on the sideboard.

Lady Jane whisked the lid off the silver saucepan. "There is nothing like presence of mind," she said complacently. "And now bring some fresh coffee, and let us go on with our breakfasts."

Mollie had to stop laughing as best she might.

"It is a good thing Gwendo did not come down to breakfast," said Lady Jane presently.

"Has she a headache this morning?"

"Not much; you may go and have a chat on her bed if you like, Mollie, after breakfast. As for you, Charlie, you have got to earn your bread to-day, if you please."

"What am I to do? From breaking stones on the road upward I am at your service."

"Shoot for the cook," said Lady Jane. "It is essential, especially as I am going to have a number of people here next week."

"What do you want?"

"Anything you can get, biped, feathered, and quadruped; there are some very wild birds still to be

had. Give your own orders. I told Peters you would want the keepers this morning."

"I hope you won't be out the very whole day," said Mollie.

"Nonsense, Mollie, I won't have him come home till it is too dark to see to shoot—the kitchen is desperately hard up."

"That is the reason we had that *salmi*," said Charlie. "I never tasted such ancient old bones in all my life."

"Ungrateful! Well, it rests with yourself whether you are fed well or not."

Mollie went up to Gwendoline's room, and met with a warm welcome from her gentle cousin.

When it grew too dark to shoot, Charlie Houghton felt that he had done his duty like a man, and came home.

Now, the post went out at six o'clock at Holliwell —a very awkward time—and Lady Jane always put off her letters to the very last, so that five o'clock was not the uninterrupted hour that by all rights it should be.

Lady Jane was writing hard at the far end of the room when Captain Houghton came in, and Mollie was sitting on a low stool by her cousin's sofa learning to make Chinese knots on a piece of embroidery.

"We will have tea without waiting for Mamma," said Gwendoline. "And you shall pour it out, Mollie."

"What luck have you had, Charlie?" asked Mollie.

"Half a brace," he answered.

"In common English, one. What was the one? animal, vegetable, mineral? how many legs? how many wings? only one head, it is self-evident."

"What do you say you have shot?" cried Lady Jane, from her writing-table.

"Four and a half brace, two hares, and a cat, Aunt Jennie," answered Captain Houghton.

"Why did you kill the cat?" cried Mollie, indignantly.

"Care killed the cat," he answered, quickly.

"Yes, but why did you shoot it? I hate poor innocent cats being shot for nothing."

"Sorry I mentioned it," answered Charlie. "It was not at all a nice puss, a regular vicious old tom—just the sort of grimalkin that a witch would have."

"Perhaps some poor old witch is now breaking her heart for the want of it."

"It is bad enough that a young witch should be doing so," said Charlie.

"After that, Mollie, you may as well give me my tea," said Gwendoline.

"Any message to your mother, Mollie?" asked Lady Jane.

"Please say I have half written a long letter, Auntie, and that I got here safely."

"Any comment on her letter, little woman?"

"No, Auntie," answered Mollie, her cheeks becoming pink, "certainly no comment. Gwendo, buttered toast, or cake, or bread-and-butter?"

"Bread-and-butter, please. No, not that bit, that bit underneath is the chosen of my heart."

"I was always brought up to take the first that came, and no choice," said Mollie, demurely.

Aunt Jennie came towards the table, and hearing Mollie's last words, said with meaning:

"Your mother was a wise woman."

Gwendoline went up to her room after tea, whither Lady Jane followed her. There was always some anxiety in her heart about this one beloved daughter, who was constantly suffering more or less, and yet was so brave, and good, and cheerful, that her sofa was a very centre of comfort and content.

Mollie ensconced herself in a very large low chair with a book. Charlie lazily lay back in another. It was very pleasant and warm, and the lamps wore green shades, which gave a delicious, subdued light.

"It is an odd thing," said Captain Houghton, slowly, "how extraordinarily fast one becomes friends with one's cousins—in fact, one gets to know them directly, as if one had been intimate for years."

"I don't think I do," answered Mollie, her thoughts wandering to her own troubles. "To tell the honest truth, I have a rooted antipathy to my cousins just now."

"A what?" he exclaimed, incredulously.

"A rooted antipathy."

"How very unkind!"

"Oh, I was not thinking of you at all, but of unknown cousins. I have lots."

"Most of them my nearest relations, I presume," he said, rather stiffly.

"I have not the least idea who your relations are," she answered. "Aunt Jennie is vague, she only described you as one of the Indian Houghtons."

"I thought you knew Stephen, at all events."

"No, I don't; which is Stephen?" asked Mollie, her face once more growing crimson. "Stephen is an awful name!"

"He is the dearest old fellow in the world," very indignantly. "There never was such an old brick."

"I feel a repugnance to his very name," she answered. "Who is he? your brother, your cousin, your what?"

"My uncle of course, but he is only ten years older than I am, and he has been so much in England that I made sure that you knew him."

"I do not, and I do not wish to know him," said Mollie very distinctly. "I am quite certain that we should not get on, or understand each other in the very least."

"I don't think he would understand you, certainly," said Captain Houghton huffily, "he is the most just, straightforward, best-tempered fellow out."

"I can't endure the very idea of him."

"At all events, you are not likely to have to put up with him, Miss Houghton, for he is not in England now."

"You are offended with me," said Mollie, suddenly aware of the enormity of her tirade.

"Not in the least, thank you," he answered coolly, "I am not Stephen."

"No, thank Heaven, you are not!"

"I never heard such prejudice in my life," said Charlie excitedly, rising to his feet. "Here is a fellow you never heard of or saw, one of the best going, the dearest old chap, and you sit there and abuse him like a pickpocket for nothing at all."

"I am accountable to no one for my likes and dislikes," said Mollie perversely

"Then you are horribly uncharitable."

"Charlie," and Mollie sat with her breath panting with indignation, "nobody ever said such a thing to me in my life."

"Oh, Mollie," he said suddenly, "you are angry; I wish I had not said it!"

"I should not mind if it were not true," she answered despondently, "and I won't say it any more."

"That's right, dear, and now we'll be comfortable again. Why, we have had a regular shindy."

"I am afraid I was cross," said Mollie penitently.

"Never mind," said Charlie superbly. "We will forget it, and you know he really is the best old fellow."

"He is not," cried Mollie, with a little stamp.

Captain Houghton threw himself down into his chair, took up his newspaper, and buried himself in its contents. Mollie returned to her book, and silence reigned.

The dressing-bell rang. Mollie rose and lit a candle.

Just as she was leaving the room, Captain Houghton followed her hastily to the door, but whatever he was going to say was nipped in the bud, for an influx of servants poured in to arrange the rooms before dinner, and he was obliged to go up and dress.

CHAPTER IV.

SEVERAL days passed, and the cousins became great friends, every day more inseparable.

Lady Jane watched the progress of their friendship with much amusement, and at the same time some slight trepidation.

A hard frost set in, so hard as to promise skating at no distant period, and at least once an hour Charlie and Mollie, one or both, went off to try the ice.

"I wonder you are not bored here," said Mollie on one of these occasions, when they stood by the lake together, cautiously trying it. "There is nothing for you to do; you must be dull enough, and you could not have hoped reasonably for this very premature frost. I suppose you will be going soon."

"I am going on the seventeenth," he answered. "Not a day later," with uncalled-for force.

"I am also going on the seventeenth," she answered. "I engaged to stay here till then, and then I shall join Mamma, whether she will or no. But you have not answered my question, are you not bored?"

"Not in the least," he answered fervently. "Being

with you turns everything into a pleasure. I can't tell you how I like it. I only wish I could think," he went on tenderly, "that you had half as much pleasure in being with me as I have in even thinking of you."

The colour rushed into Mollie's pretty cheeks, but she said nothing. Captain Houghton went on, speaking rather fast, and whisking the heads off the thistles.

"Everything that is delightful passes away so awfully fast, the days seem to fly on wings, and if there is anything disagreeable or painful coming, it seems to rush to meet you in the most unfair manner."

"It does indeed," said Mollie, with a little shiver.

Captain Houghton had reached that stage in which a man feels a great wish to speak about himself.

"I am sure you would sympathise with me, Mollie," he said, "if I were able to tell you any of my anxieties. I am so weighted, so beset."

"I am very sorry," said Mollie gently, laying a little gloved hand on his arm. He took it, and held it in his, and went on, "I dare not even allow myself to be happy now, in the present moment, because I am tied hand and foot by a—a bother I cannot tell you about."

"I wish I could help you," said Mollie, sweetly.

"There, don't let us talk any more about it. I can't say what you are, Mollie. The ice won't bear; there is not a chance of it to-day."

They walked home very silently. Just as they reached the door, Mollie glanced up at him very

shyly, but her eyes fell again immediately, abashed by a look in his they had never met before, telling a new story. Mollie ran upstairs with her heart beating fast.

"Aunt Jennie," said Mollie, one day when they were alone together, "has Charlie any money?"

"Not a sixpence, my dear."

"Oh!"

That was all. Mollie thought, rather ruefully, that two hundred thousand pounds would build a magnificent hospital.

On the tenth, Holliwell's hospitable walls were filled with guests.

"It is unlucky our being in mourning," said Lady Jane. "We can't have a regular ball, but I do not see that there could be the smallest objection to the young people dancing in the evening after dinner in the morning room. The parquet is excellent, and I can have over a man to play the piano."

"Better fun than a regular ball," said Gwendoline, from her sofa. "Mollie, did Mamma tell you that Tom and Meta are coming?"

"No! How delightful! That is nice! What fun Meta will have! she does so like dancing. Dear Auntie, you always think of everything that is most delightful!"

"Tom and Meta are going to stay a good long time, Mollie, to help me to look after you," said Lady Jane, smiling.

"I need not go before the seventeenth," said Mollie, with forced calmness. "Then I am obliged to join Mamma."

"I daresay!" said her aunt. "No, no, Miss Mollie; it is all very well to enjoy yourself, and have as much fun and flirtation as you like, but the real business in hand must not be overlooked."

"Auntie, I am not going to do it."

"Now, no nonsense, darling! Life is made up of reality, not romance."

But Mollie had put her fingers into her ears, and nestled her head into her aunt's neck; she wanted also to hide her hot cheeks.

Poor child! if it had seemed impossible before she came to Holliwell, it seemed a thousand times more so now.

Meta and her husband arrived about tea-time, at the same time as other fresh guests. Mollie was enchanted to see her sister, and to pour out to her all the events of her visit. But Lady Jane was determined that there should be no private conferences before she had "coached" her niece. So she took her upstairs, and would not leave the room till she had found her opportunity. "All is going on prosperously, Meta," she said. "But Mollie might fly off at a tangent at any moment, and so might he; we must keep up a wholesome fear of the eighteenth before their eyes without a moment's intermission."

"Nobody but you could have done it so cleverly, Auntie. I never was so amused in my life. What a play it would make!"

"If only the *dénoûment* is satisfactory," said Lady Jane, with a sigh. "But I never knew such a pair of

spitfires as they are! I must positively go and let you dress. Are you tired?"

"Oh, no, as fresh as paint, and prepared to dance all night. Oh! Aunt Jennie," she exclaimed, in a tone of agony, "Mollie went downstairs again, and if Tom says anything——"

"I will never forgive him," cried Lady Jane, running downstairs. But it was all right. Mollie and Gwendoline were together, and several men were grouped round the fire, among whom stood Sir Thomas Grey, who, in spite of his wife and children, looked one of the youngest of them.

"Oh, how I do like dancing!" exclaimed Mollie, some hours later, as she paused in the midst of a waltz with her cousin, Captain Houghton.

"Dancing for dancing's sake?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed, for what else's sake? The partner is only a detail. Besides, they so often want to stand still. Shall we go on?"

"But perhaps I am tired," he said, without moving. "I want to go and sit down in the conservatory."

"Do you really?"

"Really."

"Very well; I am sorry you are tired so soon."

"I like the smell of the flowers."

"There is nothing much worth speaking of just now. Do you like sensitive plants?"

"Why?"

"It is such fun to touch them, and see their utter disgust; the repugnance they feel for one is so

admirably expressed! There is a whole row of them in here."

"I don't like to see them teased," said Charlie, as Mollie left his arm and went up to them. "It is a barbarous amusement, and there is that nice red ottoman that looks so inviting."

"I don't like the effect of the Chinese lantern hanging over it."

"Nonsense, Mollie; nothing is unbecoming to you. Do leave those miserable plants alone. I did not know that you were born with such a cruel disposition."

"Yes, I like to torment things. Do look."

Her light touch caused a large branch of one of the unhappy plants to fade away.

"You should not be such a little bully," said Charlie. "Do come here; I do so want to talk to you."

"There is Meta," said Mollie, gaily. "Do you know her?"

"I took her in to dinner," he answered, a little sulkily.

"Don't you think she is quite charming? Are you not sure that you should like all my sisters?"

"Not at all," he said quickly, then pulled himself up; "but I think Lady Grey quite charming!"

"I think you would like all of them quite immensely."

"I am sure I shouldn't!"

Mollie's blue eyes opened very wide. She had no time to answer before the entrance of Meta and her husband.

"Hullo, Polly Hopkins! idle here? A thousand pardons," as his eye fell on Captain Houghton. "I thought my sister-in-law was alone."

"I am not idle," said Mollie. "See what I have been doing," pointing to the row of disconsolate half-dead-looking plants.

"You horrid, unkind little thing! I did not think it was in you," said Tom. "Cannot you remedy the evil?"

"Humpty Dumpty," said Meta, sadly, "not all the king's horses, and all the king's men——"

"Oh! Tom," said Mollie, eagerly, "do let us have one turn—Captain Houghton is tired," turning her pretty eyes upon him with a look of compassion, "and my toes will dance about."

"Will you have compassion on me, Captain Houghton, and let our respective partners go off together?" said Meta, smiling. "You were exceedingly comfortable here."

And she seated herself on the red ottoman.

"I am not in the least tired," said Charlie. "I don't know what Mollie meant by saying so."

"She has only had one season," said her sister, apologetically, "and dancing to her is unlimited bliss."

"Lady Grey," said he, suddenly, "your sister Amelia, is she—is she——"

"She is a pretty girl," answered Meta, pretending to examine her fan carefully. "A nice, pretty little girl."

"Is she at all—at all like you, for instance?"

"Not the least in the world: our colouring is

different, our dispositions totally different. She is romantic, I am exceedingly commonplace, she is very wrong-headed, and so on. But what is the use of my describing her? You will meet on the eighteenth."

He gave a little jump, as if from an electric shock.

"I am sorry to say," he said, stiffly, "that I shall not be able to have that honour. I am unfortunately obliged to rejoin on the seventeenth."

"Oh, indeed, that is unlucky," said Meta, biting her lips. "I hoped that you would be staying on here some little time. It is such a pleasure to make friends with one's cousins," she added, looking up at him with something of Mollie's irresistible charm.

"It is awfully good of you to say so," he said. "I was only thinking to myself the other day how quickly cousins get to know each other, in a sort of way that strangers could not do in three times the time. Don't you think so?"

"I do, indeed. I am sorry you can't stay over the eighteenth."

Charlie pulled himself together, with the abruptness of a snail whose finger-tips have touched something unwonted.

Lady Grey rose to her feet; she coughed, and fanned herself; in another moment she would perhaps have betrayed herself, so insurmountable was the wish to laugh, but the last dying bars of the waltz promised relief.

"Shall we go back?" she said. "The dance is over."

They met Sir Thomas and Mollie on the three-

hold. "We are going to have some tea, Meta," said the former, drawing his wife's little hand through his arm, and humming as they walked off,

"Pollie, put the kettle on,
And we'll all have tea."

"May I have the pleasure of taking you to have some tea, Mollie?" said her cousin.

"Thanks, I shall be very glad."

"All right?" said Tom, in a low whisper. Meta nodded.

"Make a joke, Tom; oh, for pity's sake, make a joke, or I shall die for want of a decent excuse to laugh."

CHAPTER V.

ALL the hope of ice had long vanished, to the sorrow of some, but the unmitigated satisfaction of the hunting men.

Lady Jane kept only two or three riding-horses, but her friends, Sir Thomas Grey among others, were in the habit of sending their hunters to her stables.

In former days Holliwell had been a great hunting-house, and poor patient Gwendoline owed her sad invalid life to a hunting accident.

Most of the men appeared at breakfast in pink. Mollie thought her cousin far the best-looking among them, even though he did not go in for that becoming colour.

Lady Jane offered Meta a mount, but in spite of the brilliant look of delight in her eyes, Sir Tom took it upon himself at once to refuse.

"She does not ride to hounds now, Aunt Jane," he said. "I think it is not really safe for women, and they are always awfully in the way."

"Tom has never got over the fact that he lost the run of the season, the day he proposed to me in a very muddy lane. It is ungenerous—not that I complain," she said, laughing and following her aunt up-

stairs to dress for the meet. "When one has such an enormous family as I have, one must not risk one's precious life."

"Good child!" said Aunt Jennie approvingly.

"I wish Tom would have let you, only for once," said Mollie. "Aunt Jennie won't let me ride without a chaperone."

"Little girls must do as they are told," said Meta.

"What are you going to wear?"

"A gown, a shawl, and a bonnet."

"What gown, what shawl, what bonnet?"

"You shall see."

Lady Grey was quite satisfied when Mollie made her appearance in a very pretty costume.

"Tailor-made, that's right," she said, approvingly, adding quickly: "How do I look?"

"Delicious!"

"So Tom says when I wear all this fur. Give me a kiss, Mollie. Ah! you must wear that on the eighteenth."

"I can't indeed," said Mollie. "I am not going to waste my very best on Charles; he never knows what we have got on our backs."

"How odd! and yet to judge by the trouble Mr. Poole must have taken with the exquisite fit of his garments to-day, I should have thought he had a good eye."

"I was alluding to our brother Charles, Mettie, you know perfectly well. I shall be in the home of our forefathers. Oh, dear! how stuffy it will be."

"It is stuffy," said Meta. "I don't know why, but the moral atmosphere is stuffy. Charles himself is stuffy, and as for the children, they are the stuffiest of all."

"And yet to think how Mamma is pining to get rid of me, and go and live there, and take care of Charles and his bereaved ones."

"Mollie," said Meta in a whisper, "some bereavements are blessings in disguise."

"I used to think so," said Mollie, mournfully. "But I don't know, when I see how Mamma longs to shunt me on a siding! I believe she would be glad to marry me to—to—whom shall I say?"

"Stephen."

"Meta, I hate you!"

"Make haste, girls!" cried a voice from below. "The ponies hate standing."

And they ran downstairs.

The gentlemen came home late; they had had a good day, and betook themselves to the warmth and ease of the smoking-room.

Meta, Mollie and the other ladies sat in Gwendoline's boudoir, where some took novels, and some fell asleep.

"Mollie," said Lady Grey presently, "are you in a good humour!"

"Not in the least," answered Mollie. "What can I do for you?"

"You can fetch me the third volume of this book; it is in the drawing-room, on the green table by the fire."

"It is not much use," said Mollie. "The dressing-bell will ring in half a quarter of a second."

"You lazy child, when you know I need not begin to dress for ten minutes after the bell. My heroine is insensible in the arms of her father, with a slow stream of blood oozing rapidly from her parted lips; my hero has gone off with homicidal intentions; the bad woman reigns supreme; and in short, Mollie, if you won't go, I must, and that last, decency forbids."

For Lady Grey had her hair down, and her little white fur slippers on, without stockings.

"After that," said Mollie, "I dare not refuse," and she rose slowly out of her very snug low chair, and went downstairs.

The drawing-room was empty, the fire burning low. Mollie could not find the third volume of her sister's book; it certainly was not on the green table by the fire, nor on the red table, nor anywhere else in the room. Mollie wandered on, looking for it among all the scattered Mudie books in vain. Suddenly she bethought her of continuing her search in the library. She crossed the morning-room, and opened one of the big library doors.

It was dark, no light whatever except from the fire, which, though a large one, was black and fitful.

Mollie made her way up to it, and was just taking a cedar match from the chimney piece with which to light a candle, when she suddenly perceived that she was not alone in the room.

Deep in a low chair by the fire sat, or rather lay, Captain Houghton enjoying a well-earned doze.

Mollie was about to retire very softly—but it was too late—he opened his eyes. A piece of coal fell in with a little crash, and in the brilliant blaze that burst out in consequence, Mollie stood revealed. He jumped to his feet.

"I came for a book," said she, demurely. "I am so sorry to have disturbed you."

"You are not going away again this very moment, I hope," he said, entreatingly. He took hold of one of her hands as if to urge his request.

"How very cold your poor little hands are!" forgetting to give it up again. "Here, positively you must warm them before you go. Nobody ever comes in here before dinner, we shall be quite snug."

He drew forward the big chair in which he had been so comfortable, gave her a handscreen to shade her face from the fire, and fetched a little cane chair for himself.

"You know, Mollie," he went on, in rather an aggrieved voice, "since the people came I have seen next to nothing of you. It is unbearable."

"It was quite time that you should have a little variety," she answered, quickly. "We have had nobody but each other to amuse ourselves with, for ever so long."

"I am sorry you were tired of it."

"I was not in the least tired of it," she answered.

"Oh!"

There was a moment's pause.

"I must go upstairs," said Mollie, quite aware that he wanted to say something that did not come easily.

"No, no, please don't. Surely you need not always run away whenever I get you to myself."

"Be quick then," said Mollie, frivolously, to hide that her heart was beating so fast.

"Mollie, did any one ever ask you to marry them?"

"Yes."

"I thought so," he said, bitterly. "Of course, dozens have."

"No, only two, indeed, Charlie."

"Were they rich?"

"One was, very."

"Why did you not have him?" Don't you know that money is the magnum bonum of life?"

"Is it? I dare say. I never tried."

"There is nothing so desirable," he said, hastily. "I should have married that rich man if I had been you."

"But mercifully, all things considered, I am myself and not you. I really must go, they will be wondering what I am doing."

"No, no, don't go. I do so want to speak to you. Mollie, are you fond of money?"

"I am fond of the things money buys," answered she, laughing. "I like nice, pretty, comfortable things —I like nice gowns and all that sort of thing; but one can do a great deal now-a-days with very little money, for the big shops are all in a chronic state of selling off——"

"Oh, Mollie," in a tone of despair. "You would never do for a poor man's wife."

"I cannot cook, and I cannot scrub, but I am clean and tidy, and I dare say I could make him comfortable enough to keep him out of the public-house," she said solemnly.

"You always turn everything into fun! and as for me, I never was further from fun in all my life—I don't mean that sort of poor."

"You mean genteel poverty," said Mollie, laughing a little wildly. "In novels it is always said to be the worse of the two, but I never can see it—instead of being ashamed of making the pudding myself, I should glory in it, if I did it well. But, unluckily, all those I ever made collapsed at the critical moment. I make toffee splendidly!"

"Don't laugh at me, Mollie; if you only knew how unhappy I am."

"Are you unhappy, Charlie?" and she looked up at him with her large blue eyes suddenly grown soft and tender. "Why did you not tell me? I am sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?"

He went down on one knee before her, taking her two hands in his.

"Is there anything you could not do for me? My darling, my own darling, if only——"

The door burst open, and a housemaid came in with a rush. There was a terrified exclamation of "Lor!"

But Captain Houghton and Mollie were far apart. The housemaid thought that she could not believe the sight her own eyes had beheld, when she heard the perfectly calm voice in which Captain Houghton said:

"I believe this was the book for which you came in search, Miss Houghton."

Mollie's quiet answer as she took it was:

"Oh yes, thank you," and she sailed away upstairs to dress, with dignity.

Gwendoline's boudoir was deserted by all but its mistress, who exclaimed:

"My dear child, how late you will be! What have you been doing! Dinner will ring in two minutes."

"I have brought Meta's book," said Mollie throwing it down by her cousin and darting away. "Oh defend me from being late!"

"Meta's book indeed!" said Gwendoline taking up the volume with a smile. "I did not know that Meta was reading Carey's Dante's 'Inferno'!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning, at breakfast, Meta received a letter from Lady Mary, announcing the dismal fact that all "dear Charles'" poor children had got the measles. She handed the letter to Mollie in silence, who bit her lips and grew very rosy, her heart dying within her.

Marchlands unavailable, where could she go on the seventeenth, which day was approaching with giant strides?

"Mettie," she said, putting her arm round her sister's waist, and drawing her into the morning-room after breakfast, "I don't believe one catches measles after one is grown up; do you?"

"I don't think it advisable to try, my dear, especially as you have never had them before. Mamma would not hear of it."

"Then I suppose she will come back to London for me."

"And leave Charles' bereaved darlings! Mollie, what an inhuman suggestion!"

"But I am a bereaved darling, too."

"I daresay; but you are one to six, and you are in the most robust health."

"But, seriously, Mettie," lowering her voice, and looking up piteously at her sister, "what is to become of me? You know I can't stay here."

"I know nothing of the kind, Poll. Pray, what is to prevent you from staying here? I am going to stay."

"Oh, Mettie, how horrid of you! I thought you would be sure to go, and let me go with you to the Moat."

"Nothing I should have liked better, but you see, dear, I have promised to stay, and one can't do a rude thing."

"Not even for once, Mettie?"

"No; life would not be long enough to atone."

"Do you know Aggie's plans?"

"They are engaged for the hunt-ball at Woodlands on the nineteenth—constituents, you know."

"What is to become of me?" said Mollie, with a sigh that touched her sister.

"Aunt Jennie," she said, seeing her aunt pass through the open door, "here is a poor little mortal who wants a little comforting."

"What is the matter, Princess Goldenlocks?" said Lady Jane, coming in, and fondly kissing the sweet little wistful face turned up to her.

"Charles's horrid children have got the measles" —in a very dolorous voice.

"Oh, is that all? I daresay they will have them very favourably, and it will be an excellent thing over."

"But you see, Auntie," went on Mollie, busily

fastening and unfastening the tiny pearl horse-shoe brooch at Lady Jane's throat, "I can't go to Marchlands because I have not had it. Don't you think it would be a good thing over with me too?" she said, suddenly brightening up; but her face fell at the emphatic answer—

"Certainly not—not to be thought of. Besides, what is it all about? The children will be quite well, and running about, long before you leave me. Now I have got you, I don't mean you to leave me in a hurry, my pet."

"I don't want to leave you, Auntie, only you see —you see—I must go before the eighteenth;" and Mollie's voice was tearful.

"No, no," said Aunt Jennie, severely, though she gave an odd little significant look at Lady Grey over Mollie's head. "My dear child, we must not have any of that nonsense. You know your cousin is a most especial pet of mine—he is a good, honourable, upright young fellow—very handsome, too. I cannot say that I think you are to be pitied."

"But, dear Auntie, it is so wicked to run counter to Uncle George's wishes—that hospital——"

"Mollie," said her aunt, gravely, "don't be a hypocrite; you must look the thing fairly in the face. It would be almost dishonest if, for a mere caprice on your part, you deprived a man, in every way a noble fellow, of the fortune actually meant for him."

"Don't you see it, Mollie?" said Lady Grey, kissing her warmly.

Lady Jane went on: "You are not old enough,

my dear, to appreciate the value of wealth, especially to a man. To yourself it would probably not signify so much, as I daresay you would some time or other marry some one; but to your cousin it is life or death —his whole future lies in your hands, whether he is to remain all his life a poor soldier (probably be killed in the next Indian campaign), or be a really happy rich man enabled to make full use of the very considerable talents he possesses. I am as fond of him as if he were my own son, and I hope, Mollie, that you are not going to disappoint me so bitterly."

"But, Auntie," said poor Mollie, very eagerly, "it would be a cruel kindness, indeed, to marry a man whom one hated."

"How can you hate him? You know nothing whatever about him. You may very quickly learn to feel quite differently about him; he is charming, and, you silly little Mollie, what do you know about love?"

Poor Mollie! what would she not have given to prevent the colour rushing into her cheeks as it did, so painfully, that it brought the tears into her eyes.

"But, Auntie," she said, bending her head very low indeed, "I might know some day, and I am only just eighteen, and I don't, don't, don't want to marry any one at all."

"It is all self, self, and nothing else," said Lady Jane, and turning away, she spoke to Meta over Mollie's head:

"You know, Meta," she said, "how your cousin has been like my own child. When he was quite a

boy, he always spent his holidays here; he was the finest, most generous-hearted little fellow in the world. You heard how he distinguished himself in the Afghan war, of course? All his life he has been told to look upon himself as Uncle George's heir, but, in spite of that, he behaved as not another man in ten thousand would have done, working hard, never calculating on it for one moment—though, poor fellow, I know he had built castles in the air, for he used to confide them to me, and they were always such good ones: he meant to be such a useful, active man, full of good schemes."

"What made Uncle George alter his will?" said Meta, quickly.

"Don't you know? He did it after your mother and Mollie stayed with him last year, just before she came out."

"The time when he gave her the pearl necklace?"

"Yes; he took a great fancy to her, which is not to be wondered at, considering all things," fondly patting Mollie's golden head. "And he took the foolish notion into his head to marry his two favourites, and ensure both their future fortunes. He little knew!" she said with a sigh.

"I wish we had never gone there," said Mollie, dolefully.

"I wish with all my heart that you had not," said Lady Jane, fervently. "Then my poor boy would have had his own."

"Come along, Polyanthus! you are wanted," exclaimed Sir Thomas Grey, coming in.

Mollie, terrified lest her tearful eyes should be seen, dashed past him upstairs.

"Hullo!" he said with astonishment, looking from his wife to her aunt.

"Yes," said Meta, answering his look. "We have been pitching into Mollie."

"Don't bully her too much, poor little girl," he said, being very soft-hearted on the subject of his young sister-in-law.

"Don't be afraid," said Lady Jane, laughing; "I am sure that it is the only way to bring it all right in the end."

Tom walked away with a "Humph!"

Mollie did not come down again all the rest of the morning. She spent it walking up and down her room in a fever of misery.

Lady Jane and Meta, both knowing that all must and would come right in the end, had not at all realized the extent of their poor little victim's present suffering, which was really considerable.

Charlie's words, Charlie's touch as he held her hands, the look of his loving, earnest eyes, all were present with her; and now that the struggle between her heart and obedience had begun, she found out that there was nobody in the whole wide world to compare to Charlie. "What was to be done?"

She paced up and down, she prayed to be guided aright, she cried so bitterly, and struggled so much against her feelings, that when luncheon-time came, and Lady Grey came up to look for her, she pronounced her not fit to be seen, and pleading the

excuse of a headache, sent up her luncheon to Gwendoline's boudoir, from whence it was taken away untasted.

All the afternoon, carefully following out a little programme arranged between Meta and Lady Jane, Mollie was left alone. She had worn herself out with crying, and felt weak for want of the luncheon, and altogether very low and miserable.

Just before tea Gwendoline was carried upstairs to her boudoir. As soon as she found herself alone with her cousin, Mollie ran to her and buried her face in her lap.

"I have made up my mind, Gwendo," she sobbed. "I will do it. I won't take away his horrid money. He shall have it. I will marry him, and always hate —hate—hate him."

A sob between each word.

"My darling, my dear good child, I am so pleased. You darling, you don't know how happy you will be. There is nobody so charming as he is, Mollie, so dry your eyes, and give me a kiss. She is going to be good, Mamma," as Lady Jane came in. "She is going to be the happiest little wife in Christendom, and she is quite worn out."

A regular shower of kisses and petting followed. Mollie, who thought she must be very ill, so new to her were the sensations of headache, faintness, and the exhaustion of long crying, was thankful to be petted and made much of, and much revived by tea, and also by the praises and commendations she received. She sat comfortably by the fire with her

feet wrapped up, and ate more toast and bread-and-butter than she could have believed possible.

"Shall you feel able to come down to dinner, my child?" asked Lady Jane.

Mollie answered, "Oh, yes," with a little gasp. She wished to get it over so much, meeting Charlie again, and beginning her new *rôle* in his presence. She must altogether avoid him, be unkind to him if she could, anyhow avoid meeting those looks out of his honest, loving eyes—all must be at an end. "He will never, never call me his darling again," she thought, and at that thought she must have cried again, had not the dressing-bell rung sharply.

Mollie went down to dinner close to her sister, hoping to slip unperceived into the room, but fate was not so kind.

Captain Houghton was anxiously looking out for her, and advanced very eagerly.

"I do so hope that your head is better," he said. "Was it very bad, Mollie? I am afraid it must have been."

"Not very, thank you," answered Mollie, and she wondered whether the odd, set little answer was in her own voice or not—she saw Charlie give a little start, and then she deliberately turned away from him, and began talking to some one else.

"Come along, Mollie, I am to take you in," said Tom Grey, coming for her. He patted the little hand on his arm very kindly as they crossed the hall, and said in a whisper:

"Meta has been telling me that——"

"Oh, please, Tom," cried Mollie, in an agony, quite breathless with horror. Tom only laughed, and turned the subject.

After dinner Mollie seated herself quite out of reach among the ladies, and once when Captain Houghton managed to come up to her she opened a book on the table, so that he turned and went away abruptly.

"There, my task is almost done," she said to herself, as her eyes followed his retreat quite away along the big rooms towards the billiard-room. "And my heart is quite broken."

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN HOUGHTON could not at all understand what had happened to cause this estrangement between himself and his lovely little cousin. The next day he several times sought her out, only to become more certain that she deliberately avoided him. He racked his brains to make out in what way he could have offended her, and finally came to the conclusion that his words, almost tantamount to a declaration of love that evening in the library, had displeased her, and that she was taking this method of showing him that she did not care for him.

"She need fear no persecution from me," he said to himself hotly, and determined to give up all attempt at explanation. But one day, as he stood rather moodily looking out of the window, bored by everything, by the plans for the day, by the fine weather, by life in general, he happened to turn and catch a glimpse of Mollie's face. She was sitting on a low stool by Gwendoline's sofa with some work in her hands; all the other ladies were busily talking, but Mollie's needle was not drawn through, and her eyes were turned on the window where he stood half hidden by the curtain.

Those blue eyes looked larger than they used to do, they were shining with a sad, wistful, deprecating look in them ; she looked so white, and young and forlorn, that a great pang shot through Charlie's heart.

" My darling, my darling," he said to himself, and could not repress a little forward movement. Mollie saw, and with the rapidity of lightning resumed her work.

Captain Houghton determined that, do what she might, she should not escape an explanation. He would make her listen to him for once.

The next day was the sixteenth. Only one more day, it was now or never.

But the opportunity did not present itself, or rather was so carefully evaded by Mollie that it could not be grasped.

At bed-time, Captain Houghton lit Mollie's candle ; this she could not avoid, nor could she help putting her cold little hand into his, to say good-night.

He held it fast, saying in a low voice :

" Mollie, I am going away to-morrow, and I must, and will, see you alone first."

She would not look up ; she felt, though she did not see, the passionate pleading in his eyes.

" Oh no, no," she panted.

" Very well, I suppose it must be as you wish," he said sadly, dropping her hand and turning away.

Poor little Mollie ! Could she let him go like this ? She followed him with a little quick run, and took hold of his coat-sleeve.

"Charlie," she said, then stopped.

"Well?" still icily cold.

"It would be of no use. I would come. Oh! don't you believe me? But it would be of no use."

All the ladies had gone upstairs; the men had dispersed to their rooms or to smoke. Nobody was on the staircase but themselves.

"Oh, Mollie," he said, suddenly. "What do you mean? Am I to go away then without one word? without one good-bye?"

Mollie held out her hands.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried. "Please, I—I can't bear it."

Both his arms were round her in a moment.

"Mollie, my darling, my darling," he cried, "I love you, my darling. Mollie, Mollie, don't turn away like that; you must not, you shall not."

"Charlie, let me go! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Say you love me! Look at me, my own; let me see your sweet eyes."

"I can't—I can't! Don't you understand, Charlie? I am going to marry—to marry another man."

He let her go, then; he started back, and Mollie fled away like a lapwing, and never stopped or drew breath till she reached her own room, and had thrown herself on her bed, sobbing as if her very heart would break.

That evening, Lady Jane had taken Meta into her own dressing-room before going to bed, and they sat together before the fire. Lady Jane was anxious and rather unhappy about her plan.

"I have a great many misgivings, Meta," she said, "and I want you to be hopeful and encourage me. I had a long talk with Charlie this afternoon when we were out, and he told me that no power on earth should induce him to marry her—'selling himself for money,' as he called it. Such nonsense! I am afraid it is an awkward business just now. He is going away to-morrow, and declares that he will not return and will take the greatest possible pains to avoid Amelia Houghton. I did not think such haughty determination was in him. Oh, Mettie, do you think he is sufficiently in love with Mollie to forgive me?"

"I do, indeed," said Meta, hopefully. "I never saw any man more so, especially since Mollie has been treating him so badly. Has she not behaved beautifully?"

"Yes; but oh, Meta, I am terrified to death. I hope it will all come right."

"I have not the least doubt in the world," said Lady Grey. "And the marriage will be all the happier for the fact that true love did not at all run smoothly."

Meta went away to bed, and Lady Jane was still sitting rather sadly before the fire, when she was startled by a quick sharp knock at the door.

"Come in," she said; and her nephew came into the room.

Captain Houghton was as white as a sheet, and he had a stern frown on his brow, his lips tightly compressed.

"I am glad you are not gone to bed, Aunt Jane," he said; "I have something to say to you."

"My dear boy, you are as cold as ice. Is anything the matter?"

"No, no; nothing. I wish to say good-bye. I am going up to London by the eight o'clock train to-morrow, but I will come back the day after, on the eighteenth, and I will marry the woman after all."

"Oh, Charlie!"

"Yes," he said, bitterly. "After all, there is nothing like money. Send the dog-cart to meet the five o'clock train, please. Good night."

He did not kiss her, or do anything but walk out of the room as quickly as he had entered it, and Lady Jane sat thunderstruck.

"He must have had some scene with my poor little Mollie," she said to herself.

Before finally going to bed, she went very softly to Mollie's room and went in.

The curtains and shutters were open, and the moonlight streaming in. Mollie lay fast asleep in its rays, with one arm thrown over her head, like a tired child. There were tears on her cheeks, and a little catch in her breath now and then, which showed that she had sobbed herself to sleep. She looked so very pretty, so young and sweet, that Aunt Jennie could not help crying a little as she bent over and prayed that God would bless her.

The next morning, Lady Jane came to Mollie's room. "Charlie Houghton has gone away," she said, in a tone of studied indifference. "He went by the

eight o'clock train up to London. He always was uncertain in his movements—here to-day, gone to-morrow. By-the-bye, Mollie, did he think you were going to-day?"

"Yes," answered Mollie, very low. "I always said I was."

"Come down to breakfast, dear. This morning I am going to send you out riding with Tom; it will bring back some colour into those white cheeks of yours."

The ride did Mollie a great deal of good. Tom was so kind to her and considerate—all subjects bearing on the awful morrow were carefully and successfully avoided.

The afternoon brought an amusing letter from Woodlands, where Aggie had enjoyed herself much, and also a few lines from Lady Mary, giving a satisfactory account of the children, who were taking to their beds at slow intervals, one after the other, promising to prolong the quarantine most unnecessarily.

So the weary day ended, and the eighteenth dawned at last.

CHAPTER VIII.

IT rained the whole day—one unceasing, uncompromising downpour.

The ladies spent the morning in Gwendoline's room; the men were all out with the hounds. The hours rolled slowly on to most of them; to Mollie they seemed to go with preternatural rapidity. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were brilliant. Nobody spoke to her about the dreaded arrival, but at luncheon she heard her aunt's order:

"The dog-cart to meet Captain Houghton by the five-five train."

Her deart died within her. She had been right then: Stephen also was a captain; the very familiarity of the name gave her a fresh pang.

After luncheon Meta, seeing how feverish the poor child looked, invited her to put on an ulster and accompany her for a walk in defiance of the rain.

Mollie was delighted. It was wet, muddy and splashy, but the sisters enjoyed it, and came home looking all the better for it.

Five o'clock struck; tea was brought into the drawing-room. Lady Jane, who, for a wonder, had

no letters to write, had arrayed herself in the delicious folds of crimson plush, and had ordered, in addition to the usual fare, scones and tea-cakes; all looked extremely comfortable.

She spoke in a low tone to one of the servants. Mollie distinctly heard the words:

"When Captain Houghton comes, show him into the library."

Her heart beat fast, she felt as if she could not swallow a mouthful. Meta charitably drew forward her own chair, so as to throw Mollie and her pale little face quite into the shade, and she talked and laughed and made fun with a vivacity that was somewhat forced.

"Captain Houghton has arrived, my lady, and is in the library," was announced.

"He is very punctual," said Lady Jane, rising, with an anxious smile, and she left the room.

Meta kept up the conversation bravely, though she felt that her poor little sister, sitting down by her, was trembling from head to foot.

A quarter of an hour passed, and then Lady Jane came back; her face was quite radiant now, and she telegraphed something to Meta which no one else saw. Aunt Jennie called Mollie, who jumped up with a great start, and raised her woe-begone little face questioningly. Aunt Jennie looked at her smiling, with a heartless want of compassion.

"Come with me, darling, if you have finished your tea," she said.

There was no escape. Mollie rose and did as she

was told. Lady Jane led her away to the library door.

"Your cousin is anxious to see you, my child," she said.

"Oh, Auntie, you will come too?"

"No, no, don't be silly, Mollie. Go in, dearest, indeed trust me, there is nothing to be afraid of."

And Lady Jane opened the library door, and left Mollie on the threshold, going away quite quickly herself.

Mollie went forward; her heart beat so fast that she felt quite suffocated; she hardly knew how she managed to get all the length of that long, dark room, for there was only a green-shaded reading-lamp close to the fire.

Her terror made her almost blind, she could only see a tall, dark figure coming towards her, and she put out her hand to meet it, gasping:

"How do you do?"

The little hand was not released, but held tighter and tighter.

"Mollie," said a voice, oh, how strangely familiar!

"Mollie," once again.

Then she was gathered into Charlie's arms, and his words came fast on her ears:

"Mollie, my darling, my own, it is all right! Aunt Jennie has told me all about it. You are Amelia and I am Stephen; my darling, my beloved, don't you see?"

But Mollie neither saw nor understood anything, only that she was sobbing on his breast, and that he

said that it was all right. The reaction had been too strong.

"Well, Mollie," said Aunt Jennie when she came back half an hour later, "have you forgiven me?"

Mollie could only kiss her again and again.

"I don't see how it ever could have been managed otherwise," she said in a sort of odd, apologetic tone to her nephew. "You see, you were both so extraordinarily wrong-headed and perverse, and hated each other with such a deadly hatred."

The glance that passed between Charlie and Mollie was good to see, and Mollie immediately hid her face again on her aunt's shoulder.

And how about the philanthropic intentions, Mollie?" asked Tom, when he was told all about it.

"I don't know what you mean," said Mollie, indignantly.

"Oh, Mollie, Mollie! You who were so anxious to fulfil the real intentions of Uncle George's Will!"

A FRENCH SPECULATION.

CHAPTER I.

IT was a bright Sunday afternoon in the early spring, and all the little world of Blois was disporting itself on the promenade by the side of the river Loire. The scene was very gay: under the long line of trees a band of stringed instruments was labouring through an elaborate valse. The performers were amateurs: they belonged to a choral society got up by the organist of the cathedral, among the young and enterprising *bourgeoisie;* and the affair had proved a great success. As they played now, the admiring eyes of mothers, sisters, and pretty cousins were on them, and they did their best and looked their best, as became their important position!

A little apart from the band sat groups of elder ladies, chatting among themselves, watching their portly husbands and slim daughters promenading round the musicians; among them little children trotting about, daintily dressed, and *bonnes* with large white coifs on their heads and knitting in their hands. Over all the sunny sky of France, blue, bright, and gay, smiling through the tender green of the young

foliage, and reflecting itself beauteously in the fair river.

Truly, they seemed a happy and contented people, these honest *bourgeois* of the old town, full of their own concerns, and apparently well satisfied to be so. Among a group of *gros papas* who stood chattering together, and, leaning on the parapet, stood two men, both of whom seemed graver than the others. The elder of the two was a man of some importance in the town, the owner of a well-known and popular inn, "La Pie Blanche." No one was more respected than Monsieur Auguste Benoit; he and his family were most highly considered. Monsieur Benoit was about the average height of the French *bourgeois*, a liberal five-foot five; he was stout, or rather round; his prominent waistcoat was adorned by a huge gold watch-chain; he wore a massive ring set with a carbuncle, on the first finger of his right hand; his hands were fat and dimpled, and tapered to finely-pointed fingers. Monsieur Benoit's face was good-nature and *bonhomie* itself; it was round and large, smooth shaven but for the black moustache. He was bald on the top of his head; the hair behind was black as jet and so close-cut as to throw two large thin ears into loud relief. His ample double chin rested on a black satin cravat. His dress, from that cravat to the tartan trousers in folds on the hips, and tapering to the very small high-heeled boots, was perfection. Such was Monsieur Benoit on the promenade on Sunday, but to-day the shade of gravity sat on him in an unwonted manner.

Monsieur Benoit's companion was a man who might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty. He belonged to a different type altogether from his friend: he was tall, and very thin; his hair was fair and sprinkled with grey; he wore a short, fair beard, which partly concealed the restless movements of an eager, mobile mouth; his eyebrows also were constantly moving, and his eyes restless, bright, and searching; he was, despite this unrestfulness, a handsome man, with straight features and a well-made figure. He was Monsieur Legros, formerly a highly successful *avocat*, now retired upon his laurels, with his money invested in a new and startling investment. That restlessness was the restlessness of speculation; in his little office, in old days of hard work, Legros had been a much calmer man.

That such a man as Camille Legros ever had time or thought to spare for matrimony, was an astonishment to his acquaintance; but so it was. Affairs of importance had taken him to Blois, where he had hired a room in "La Pie Blanche." Madame Benoit herself always presided at the head of the *table d'hôte*, and on her right hand sat her daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche, so named, people said, after the celebrated "Pie." Before Monsieur Legros had dined three times at *table d'hôte* he had determined to make Blanche his wife. He was a man who, during a busy life, had hardly given a passing thought to women. He was, like most Frenchmen, a devoted son to his widowed mother; but, perhaps it was his experience of her that had so completely lowered his conception

of what a woman should be, that he expected in a wife a pretty nonentity—a creature not to trust or to share his confidence, but a useful housekeeper, and a credit to his taste in good looks. He was not in love with Blanche Benoit: he did not know what love was; and he demanded her from her father with a strong sense of the good match he was offering her, and that the obligation would be all on their side. Monsieur Benoit demanded a fair statement of his proposed son-in-law's finances before he would agree to the betrothal. It was given. Camille Legros was too absolutely confident in the success of his great schemes to conceal anything. Benoit was impressed by the size of the fortune, but somewhat startled by hearing that it was all invested in one vast speculation, the building of a little fashionable watering-place that was to rival Dieppe, Dinard, or Etretat in its attractions.

"You are sure—you are quite sure that the situation is one that will be popular?" asked the innkeeper, anxiously.

"Sure! I am certain," cried Legros, shrugging up his shoulders and tapping the map over which they were bending, with the back of his hand. "What more can one wish? The air is magnificent; an unbroken *plage* of hard sand; the view exquisite; in the neighbouring inland town advantages of education, of market, of medical attendance; the railway has agreed with me, for a consideration, to run an additional train from Paris; there are quarries close at hand, from which I draw my stone; it is well

adapted to building purposes; labour is cheap just now; I have capital, — what more can one desire?"

"It sounds well," said Monsieur Benoit, musingly. He was dazzled by the talk, by the ready money, by the certainty of Legros; and after a conference with Madame Benoit—for he did not share his future son-in-law's views about women—they agreed to give him their only child.

Blanche was told, and was quite satisfied; she had not thought much of the future, leaving it with perfect confidence in her parents' hands; so she was neither surprised nor disconcerted when Monsieur Legros was presented to her as her future husband; and she smiled a very pretty little smile, and made the set little speech her mother had taught her with so charming a grace, that Legros was enchanted. Blanche was charming: she was tall and slight; her face was a perfect oval, her complexion clear and white; her eyes very large and dark brown, fringed with thick dark lashes—as thick and long at each end of the eyelid as in the centre; her dark hair was cut short on the forehead, in the fashion of the day; the mouth beautifully shaped, tender, mobile, wondrously sweet in expression, but betraying something of childishness and immaturity, which befitted her seventeen years.

That Sunday afternoon at Blois was the day preceding the wedding, and Blanche and her mother were seated together for the last time listening to the band.

"That is Jean's violin," said Blanche, touching her mother's hand. "Listen, Mamma."

They sat on a bench, Madame Benoit stout in black silk, Blanche all in white; and a violin solo was played in the orchestra.

"He plays well, the little Jean," said Madame Benoit, complacently. "Thy cousin has talent, Blanche."

Yes, he was playing well, the poor boy,—playing on his own heart-strings this evening; for was not Blanche to be married to-morrow, and what should he have to live for—he, the forlorn collegian of nineteen —when his fair cousin was gone? and she never guessed it. Alas, poor Jean!

The solo ended, there was applause. He fancied he could hear her little hands joining in the applause, and he stole away out of the group of musicians, and came and stood beside her wistfully.

By-and-by an evening breeze began to stir the river; it became chilly; Madame Benoit rose.

"Oh, not yet, not yet, Mamma," said Blanche, regretfully. "I should like to linger yet a little while."

"Then go to papa, my child. I must go in, to be in time for the omnibus that comes from the train. I cannot neglect my possible travellers;" and she hurried away. Blanche went over to the parapet where her father stood.

"We are going to take a walk, *mignonne*," he said —"Monsieur Legros and I."

"Perhaps Mademoiselle Blanche would wish to come with us?" said Legros, courteously.

"May I?"

"We are enchanted."

"But how about our conversation and business, *mon cher?*" said Monsieur Benoit.

"See!" cried Jean, advancing eagerly. "If these messieurs will allow it, I will walk with my cousin; we will follow you; we shall converse; we will not interrupt you; we shall be happy."

There was a pathetic ring in the last words of the boy that struck Legros. He looked at him keenly, and then at Blanche; but he only said, briefly, "*Soit*," and they started on their walk.

On the opposite side of the river lay the little suburb of Blois, which is called Vienne. It is an insignificant little place, lying in a flat, low country, intersected with open ditches. Quite across these flat fields ran a long spine, formed by a narrow road on an embankment, just sufficiently wide to allow of trees being planted on each side of it; the rank grass and thick bushes growing up the sides of the embankment shut in this little road, and made it very quiet and green. The views now and then through a gap in the trees and undergrowth were charmingly pretty, showing picturesque old Blois, with its piled-up buildings and high steps; the river below; behind, the wide country, and a low crimson streak of setting sun.

"The last time, the last time!" said Jean in a low earnest whisper, as the two followed the elder men at a short distance behind.

"No, no; not the last time. Many and many a

time shall we pace this promenade again," said Blanche, gaily. Only to the boy it was the very last time.

Beautiful yellow dragon-flies flitted across their path. One alighted on Blanche's white gown, and she had leisure during one brief second to admire it. Then bright blue butterflies, brilliant as a patch of sky, flitted to and fro. A little damp and very green, with a faint sweet smell of marshy plants below, this walk was a perfect paradise for lovely and rare insects.

Monsieur Benoit and Legros recked not of the brilliant insect-world, save when a blundering common dragon-fly in his steel-blue armour bounced against Monsieur Benoit's face, causing him to emit a hasty expression of impatience. They were deep in business. It was a subject that had been, so to speak, already talked threadbare; but this terrible Camille Legros would come back to it again and again. Blanche would have an excellent *dot* after her father's death; but till that occurred, nothing—"not one *sou*," said the good man, energetically.

"But see, my good friend," urged Legros over and over again, "I am nearly as old as thee, and we are not either of us old! *Ma foi*, no! I tell you two thousand francs *now* would be of more value than twenty thousand after you are no more."

"No, no; ask me no more. After all, my friend, this grand affair of yours at St Didier, it is but a speculation; and if it fail, you will then have this snug little nest-egg of Blanche's to fall back upon. I know what I am about—*va!*"

"Less than this has broken a marriage, *mon cher*," said Legros, somewhat gloomily.

"Break it! break it! Only it must be done to-night, my friend," said Monsieur Benoit. "To-morrow it will be too late;" and he proceeded to light a fresh cigar. Legros walked on thoughtfully for a few steps. He was afraid to show how he longed to obtain possession of some of the promised money, or how valuable it would be to him at this moment.

"A truce to joking," he said suddenly, clearing his brow. "If you are determined, there is no more to be said. Break off the marriage! *Peste!* With me it has become an affair of the heart."

"And when you have once conversed with Blanche, it will be still more so," cried her father, enthusiastically. "I know it is not etiquette, but would you like to walk home with her now?"

"I should," said Legros, smiling a little.

Monsieur Benoit turned round: "Jean, Jean, my boy."

Jean joined him, and he passed his arm through his and walked on.

Monsieur Legros stepped back, and placed himself by the side of his young betrothed. "You are fond of flowers?" he said, observing that her hands were full of them.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"There are flowers at St. Didier, and I am planting them, making gardens everywhere."

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Have you ever been away from Blois?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Then you cannot imagine St Didier. All is new, new, new. None of these crumbling streets and mouldy buildings. All is fresh and bright, and the houses are very gay—some painted pink, and some green and white. And there is a casino, which will be very gay when the place is full of *locataires*. See, here are the plans." And he drew a roll from his pocket. "That is the great hotel, and there is the English church with a spire, and here is an artist's studio; and on the cliffs gay villas, with gardens running down to the sea."

"It must be charming—charming, Monsieur."

"What are they doing, Jean?" asked Monsieur Benoit, pressing the arm of his young cousin. "It would not be discreet for me to look, but thou—thou mayest look."

What were they doing? Jean's heart failed him, for he thought of what he himself would have been doing—whispering honeyed words, stealing loving looks from shy, downcast eyes, With hot impatience he looked back.

"Ah, bah!" he said. "You may look, Monsieur, without the smallest indiscretion. He is explaining to her the plans of St. Didier."

CHAPTER II.

THE courtyard of the "Pie Blanche" was very gaily decorated the next morning—scarlet cloth over the pavement, festoons of leaves and flowers all round the windows, and a magnificent motto in scarlet and white over the archway leading into the street. The bridal party had been to the Mairie at eight o'clock in the morning, after which they returned to the hotel, to emerge in full splendour at half-past ten.

All the busy laughing and chattering ceased when the procession was formed. They went two and two, the bride and her father at the head, Blanche dressed all in white, with her flowing veil hiding her blushing face—all the other relations arm-in-arm behind; three bridesmaids, each with her cavalier; the mother leaning on an uncle; all the friends; the ladies dressed in the height of the fashion—fawn-coloured silk, cream-coloured satin and brown, Bismarck *enragé*, *prune de Monsieur*, *noir corbeau*, *sang de bœuf* —all varieties of colours; their hair frizzed, their heels two inches high;—the gentlemen in full evening dress, cut-away coats, white waistcoats and gloves, with exquisite bouquets in their button-holes.

As the last of them passed under the archway

the two old waiters who were left behind, each flicked the napkin in his hand with a somewhat discontented flick.

"I wish mad'demoiselle was not going so far off, Battiste," said the younger of the two, who might be sixty. "Oh la! la! we shall miss her sweet face."

"Yes," answered Battiste, ruefully; "and her Monsieur is a queer sort of man—never gives one a look or a word, and sits up night after night over his accounts, like one who is not certain which side the balance will lie."

"Umph!—well, the old 'Pie Blanche' will be something solid for mad'demoiselle to fall back upon, anyhow. We do well, *hein?*"

Up the narrow, picturesque streets, up flights of stairs, mounting the hill, the procession at last reached the cathedral. With one of the bridesmaids leaning on his arm, a simpering girl in blue, came Jean, and as he walked his heart grew heavier. When they reached the great western door he could bear it no longer; he could not see Blanche given away to this stranger—it would break his heart. There was a pause at the entrance, congratulating friends pressing round, and among them Jean slipped away, leaving the aggrieved bridesmaid to do as best she might.

The cathedral stands on one height of the picturesque old town, and on another height the castle. Behind the cathedral is a dark, tree-shadowed old garden, with a parapet from which to view the lawn beneath, the flowing Loire, the great gloomy walls of the old Château de Blois. The old trees grew closely

together, and even with their young spring foliage made a thick, impenetrable shade. The garden of the old Evêché, it is called; but when Jean went into it with his sore heart, there was no dark-robed priest pacing its alleys; it was complete solitude, the cathedral bells clanging a joyous marriage cadence which smote on his ear. He flung himself on a low stone bench, hid his face in his hands, and waited. It seemed an eternity. When it was all over, there was a joyous movement and murmur. He emerged from the old garden, and was just in time to see them come out, bride and bridegroom first, bowing, smiling, shaking hands. His Blanche! no, she was his no longer—she belonged to Camille Legros. It was all over, all over, and he wished that he was dead.

The sun should shine on a wedding-day, it is true, and very sunny was Blanche's wedding-day; and it is equally important that it should shine on her first entry into her new home, but unfortunately it did not do so. The Legros remained for about a week at Blois—a week which seemed interminable to the bridegroom, who felt it a grievous waste of time —a week full of mingled disappointment, happiness, and grief to Blanche. She was dreadfully afraid of her husband, never sufficiently at ease with him to let him have any insight into her real character and the intelligence of her judgments and opinions. Her conversation was limited to monosyllables, her remarks to interjections. He pored over his plans all day, giving vent to such vivid descriptions of the

charms of St. Didier, that Blanche formed a most brilliant conception of what her new home would be; and finding that that subject pleased him best, grew bold enough to ask a few flattering questions about it. Unluckily, the questions were not easy to answer. For instance: "Will it not be difficult to have any privacy among all these people, Monsieur?" She had yet to learn that the people were still to come. Then, "I am glad my new gowns were made so much *à la mode*. Who sets the fashion at St. Didier, Monsieur?" and so on—Monsieur Legros blushing a little, and talking of the coming "season" and the present dead time of the year.

Blanche had one of those clinging natures who cannot live without loving some one. A very few gentle words, a very little affection, from her husband in the first days of their marriage, sufficed to make her love him; but it was with a timid, deprecating love, easily subdued, and very shrinking.

It was a grey, cloudy, windy day when the bride first saw her new home. The journey was a tedious one, with many changes. Blanche had wept bitterly on leaving her home and her parents for the first time. Her head ached; she was confused by the unknown bustle of travelling, and longed, poor child, for a kiss and a kind word; but Legros was not a demonstrative man. She took refuge in the thought of the charms of the new home, and of the welcome that awaited her from Madame Berthe, her husband's mother, who lived with him, and had hitherto managed his household. They reached the station,

transferred themselves and their baggage to a very shabby-looking one-horse omnibus, and were soon started on their way.

The country was flat and green, with no interesting features whatever. By-and-by, as they drove on, it grew colder and colder. A sharp north wind blowing over the sea, there was a fresher smell and taste in the air; but Blanche was so tired that she could hardly keep awake, and her eyes closed again and again. Monsieur Legros showed her some little tenderness then. He put his arm round her, and drew a shawl over her knees, and looking at the pale, beautiful little face, which almost rested on his shoulder, felt a thrill of gratification and pride. Suddenly a tremendous jolt awoke Blanche, followed by leaps and jerks, as if they were passing over heavy ruts.

"We are arriving! look up, Blanche!" cried her husband, in an excited voice. They were passing up what seemed to be an embryo street—the road not yet made, the houses all detached from each other, and in different stages of development. They turned a corner, and now faced the sea; a sudden sweep round, and they drew up before one of a row of houses which faced the beach, and appeared more finished than the others. Monsieur Legros was eagerly gazing out of the window; with a bound he leapt out of the carriage.

"Excuse me, *ma chère amie*," he cried, suddenly. "But I see such mischief going on in that villa yonder—all the painting wrong. One moment only;" and without a moment's pause he had darted

away, leaving her startled, bewildered, not knowing what to do.

"Madame had better descend," said the coachman; "I have a long way to drive back."

"Yes, yes;" cried Blanche. She got out, had her trunks removed from the roof of the carriage, and watched the man mechanically, as he rang the bell, and left her, driving off without waiting to be paid.

The young bride stood on the threshold of her new home, and the tears gathered fast in her eyes. She drew her shawl more closely round her; the wind was tearing it from her, and it was very cold.

It seemed a long time before the bell was answered. The door opened, and a little withered old woman in a loose wrapper appeared.

"Who is it?" she asked, in a shrill voice. "My *bonne* has gone off, and left no one at home. They are all alike these *bonnes;* but Rosalie is much the worst—*oui, dame*, much the worst."

"It is I, Madame—Blanche Legros," said the poor, little, weary, trembling bride. The old woman gave a little cry.

"Ah! Madame Camille! my boy's rich wife! Come in! come in! And where is he? where is he? When didst thou arrive?"

She held out her hands, embraced Blanche warmly, and retreated through the house, uttering shrill calls—"Rosalie! Rosalie! silly one! quick, quick, Rosalie! Madame Camille is come, and we not expecting her this hour or more."

Rosalie appeared at last, and helped by the two

ladies, drew in one of Blanche's boxes. The others being too heavy, were left outside for the present.

In a few moments they were seated in the *salon*, and Blanche had leisure to look about her. The drawing-room and dining-room were one; only divided from each other by a curtain, which was drawn back. Both were somewhat scantily furnished —a few hard-backed arm-chairs, a round centre table; a very large alabaster clock, with vases to match, on the mantelpiece. Blanche's eyes took it all in at a glance; then she stooped over the very small fire of damp, hastily kindled logs. Madame Berthe wore broad carpet-slippers; she rested the bellows on the wide square toe, and blew away at the faint sparks in the grate while she talked.

"So Camille left you at the very door! That was just like him, his whole heart he has thrown into this place with his money. *Dame, oui!* his whole heart and his whole fortune. So he saw something wrong, did he? Well, how could it be expected otherwise, when he had been away more than three weeks? All the workmen ceased to work, and idled about all day; the coachman drove out his friends in the carriage. A lady and a gentleman came and looked at villa La Rochelle, and nothing came of it. Wasted chances! wasted chances!"

Blanche hung her head, she felt guilty of this sad waste of time. Madame Berthe rubbed her hands with a little chuckle.

"But the season is coming on—the fine season," she said, "when all the world will be here, and St.

Didier will be as gay as Dieppe itself—a little Paris indeed."

Time passed on, and Camille Legros did not come in. Weary, faint, and exhausted, it seemed to Blanche as if the chuckling talk of Madame Berthe would never end. At six o'clock came dinner, but she was too tired to eat. When it was nearly over her husband came in ; there was a cloud on his brow she had never seen before.

"Everything has been going wrong," he said tucking the end of his napkin under his chin, and devouring great spoonfuls of soup. "Jean Marie has not looked after the men. The work at the *châlet* is where I left it. The walls of the villa No. 3 are not a foot above the ground. I have lost two good lets. Truly, I should never have been away."

Blanche winced again; he went on grumbling about neglect and carelessness, while Madame Berthe watched him, nodding like an old bright-eyed bird with her head on one side. After dinner he went out again,—not a moment given to sentiment, not a caress to his young wife.

When he was gone, Blanche pleaded to be shown her room, and was taken upstairs.

"Good night, sleep well," said Madame Berthe, with a friendly nod ; and she went off muttering to herself.

"He has chosen well—she will look very well on the promenade; much too fine a lady to look after the *ménage*. Yes, yes ; we will go on as before, and her money will keep us all straight till the *locataires* come!"

Blanche unpacked the ivory crucifix that always hung over her bed, placed it at her head, and then lay down, too utterly weary to realise that she was not happy to-night.

The next morning Blanche was up betimes, eager to see everything, and make acquaintance with her new home. It was a great pity that the sky continued to be of one uniform dull grey colour—that the sea was restless and sullen—and the rocks and islands, which made the coast so picturesque, were half shrouded with mist; but a good night's sleep had refreshed the little bride completely, and renewed all her bright castles in the air.

Madame Berthe's welcome to her this morning was far less cordial than it had been the night before, and a little startled Blanche; but she soon forgot it in watching her husband eat his breakfast and ministering to his wants to save time, for he said he had but five minutes to spare, and nothing must keep him waiting. Before he had swallowed his last mouthful he was off, and Blanche and her mother-in-law were left alone.

"My husband is always busy like this?" asked Blanche, timidly.

Madame Berthe nodded. "And need he should be," she said, grimly. "It will take all his energies to keep things going."

"But, are they not going well?" cried Blanche, very much startled. "I thought everything promised so wonderfully."

"There is a vast difference between promise and

fruition. It is a great fortune my son lays out, and we must wait, wait—*oui, dame!* we must wait to realise any profits."

She began to take away the coffee-cups as she spoke, and for the moment Blanche did not speak. Then she said, timidly:

"Will you tell me something about my husband's affairs, dear Madame? I have been told nothing."

The old woman looked at her sharply and hesitated.

"I think," she said, "that if they had thought that you were to be trusted they would have told you all about it."

The tears rushed to Blanche's eyes.

"I am to be trusted," she said, pleadingly.

"Well, then, I may as well tell you. At present Camille is embarrassed for money. Don't start and turn so pale, my dear," she said, harshly. "Of course it is only a momentary embarrassment; but he has placed his whole fortune in this affair, and of course it demands time, much time even."

"But has he no partners? Does no one share the outlay and the risk?" asked Blanche, with a little of the shrewdness of her commercial birth.

"No one, no one," said his mother, her voice growing shrill. "Every Saturday he pays his wages, two francs a day per man, and a hundred men are working on the place now; and besides that, for the houses that are furnished there are the *menuisiers*, the *vitriers*, the *tapissiers*. Oh! the money flows night and day; and every house on the place must be let well and for long before it can do more than even pay the interest

of this fortune. And you," cried the old lady, harshly, "you, who might have helped him, have failed; his very marriage has turned out a wasted opportunity: the poor boy has no chance!"

"What do you mean, Madame?" cried Blanche, shocked beyond measure.

"I mean, of course, that when a man makes a marriage he expects to find something; not that his wife should bring him nothing, her hands empty."

"And I—have I nothing?" faltered Blanche.

"Nothing; actually not one *sou* till your good father's death. Bah! he is not five years older than Camille himself."

"And then?"

"Ah, then. But what will it avail—double, treble the *dot* then—when my Camille is a millionaire? It is now, now, now!" she shrieked; "when money is going out on every hand and none coming in. *Va! va!* thou also art a failure, *ma bru!*"

Blanche burst into tears, and fled away in grief to her own room.

In the afternoon she timidly ventured downstairs again, terribly afraid of meeting Madame Berthe. The door of the kitchen was wide open, and she could not help hearing some of the conversation from within. Her mother-in-law was speaking.

"Yes, yes, Rosalie—a helpless fine lady. We will go on just as we did before; we must make our economies, thou and I, just as we did; and I will teach Madame Camille to put up with them too. Yes,

yes, why should she not? she brings nothing to the *pot-au-feu.*"

Blanche went boldly into the kitchen with a sudden impulse.

"I will make any economies you will," she said, sweetly; "anything to please you and to save money."

"Ah, bah!" said Madame Berthe, contemptuously. "Professions are all very well, but when it comes to actions——"

"You will not find me wanting," said Blanche, with gentle dignity; and she left the kitchen.

Madame Berthe hurried after her, and, catching hold of her arm, she said, eagerly:

"But see, see, *ma petite bru!* they say your father adores you. Write to him, tell him you want money, he will send it to you."

"I will. I will tell him how important it is just now for Monsieur—that it will be of such service."

"You must not! you shall not!"

"But what, then, am I to do?" cried Blanche, bewildered.

"Tell him you want it for yourself; tell him you find that you must make great toilets here; that you want a piano; that—that—there, can you invent nothing?"

"No," said Blanche, quietly; "I can invent nothing. I must tell the truth, or I will not ask."

"But you will keep all our conversation secret? You are to be trusted? No, do not look offended; but if any one knew that Camille has begun to borrow

for his week's wages, that would be the end of St. Didier."

"Of course, I will say nothing;" and Blanche drew away her arm and went out of doors.

The grey fog was still over everything, a wet sea-fog, so that the water dripped off all the houses and saturated everything. In the distance Blanche caught sight of her husband with his collar turned up round his ears, and the perpetual cigar in his mouth. She went up to him; she forced herself to smile and speak gaily as she joined him.

"Will you show me the town now, Camille?"

He was quite pleased.

"Ah, you are like an Englishwoman," he said, "not afraid of the weather."

"I am generally," she said; "but not to-day, for I want so much to see St. Didier."

There was a square garden facing the sea surrounded by houses, and from each corner of this square ran two boulevards of detached villas, each with a tiny little garden running down to the cliff, from which a small flight of steps led to the beach. These houses were in all the varied stages of completion, and swarming with workmen. The newly-planted trees were struggling into leaf. All round were the commencements of building. The English church, which had been so prominent a feature in the plans, was just one foot out of the ground. The Casino was completed, and was gorgeous. Young gardens and a lawn-tennis ground were marked out and planted with baby-trees, all top-heavy with their

large-leaved, scanty foliage, and dripping with the salt sea-fog.

"Are any of the houses taken yet?" asked Blanche, timidly.

"Yes; that house is occupied by a very rich American lady, but, oh, so exacting; she has asked for so much, and I have given her all—everything," he cried, throwing out his hands. "It shall be said of me that no landlord ever was so amiable, or gave so much."

The house he pointed out was one of the largest in the place, and looked somewhat older than the others. A very magnificent lady was standing at the window. She beckoned to Monsieur Legros.

"I must go in," he said, discontentedly. "I am sure she wants something more from me."

The lady beckoned again, and Monsieur Legros went in. Blanche waited patiently till he reappeared on the steps of the house, accompaned by the lady.

"So that is Madame Camille?" cried the latter, in a strong foreign accent, and Blanche found her hand warmly clasped. "Your husband is the best landlord I know, Madame," she went on. "I have had much experience, and have never met with a kinder one. He has just promised me a conservatory, but it shall be worth his while."

And all the time Monsieur Legros continued making obsequious bows; but when he walked on with his wife he ground his teeth.

CHAPTER III.

THE houses sprang up—a faint smell of fresh-painted *jalousies* filled the air—the sea and sky grew blue—all the golden gorse bloomed, paled, and died—the time of lilacs passed—and two dim Judas-trees which adorned the Casino gardens burst into their leafless flower. The season ought to be beginning soon. Monsieur Legros worked harder than ever. Morning, noon, and night he was out in pursuit of his workmen. One day a tenant arrived in the shape of a weary, old, grey-headed man. He rented one room, *au-cinquième*, of the small *pension* which was just finished, and wrote up a modest little placard, announcing himself as a music-master.

"It is well to be first in the field," he said to Blanche, "in a great future success like St. Didier." And Monsieur Léon was added to the prospectus as a famous singing and music master.

Then the moment came when the hot summer rush takes place from towns to the seaside,—Dieppe, Dinard, and Etretat, began to fill rapidly. Every day the St. Didier omnibuses went to meet the trains—every day Madame Berthe and Blanche stood with beating hearts to watch them come in. Often they

told each other that the carriages were full—quite full; and then it would turn out that it was a picnic party from the town, or tourists who would sleep one night at the hotel.

"One day Monsieur Legros said suddenly to his wife, "I suppose, in writing home to your father, you have told him all about our circumstances?"

"No, never, Camille," she answered. "I have kept your secrets. I knew that these things are important in the commerce."

Monsieur Legros bent down and kissed her.

"Then do this more for me, *m'amie*," he said. "Write to him; paint the whole thing in the brightest colours. I do not want you to say more than the truth, of course—but tell him the promise of it all; that I am said to be the best of landlords—that the place is getting on and becoming known."

"I have told him of our hopes, Camille; why should you wish me to say more?"

Monsieur Legros hesitated a moment, then he gave a little impatient stamp,

For a *bourgeoise* you are wonderfully dull, *m'amie*. Do you not perceive that I want him to invest some portion of your future fortune in this manner?"

"Ah! but I fear that I could not advise him to do that," said Blanche, gravely.

Her husband scowled at her, and she shrank away trembling. A few moments after she saw Madame Berthe catch hold of his arm with her claw-like hands and ask in a hard whisper—"But what did she say? will she do it?"

"Not to save me from prison," he answered bitterly, and her very heart ached as she heard the words.

The days passed on, and though the season had come, the gay world had not yet appeared. Everything bore a prosperous look; all the men were paid to the day; the further extravagant demands of the American lady were acceded to without a murmur; the English church was completed;—but no one as yet came to stay.

One day receiving a packet of her husband's letters from the postman, Blanche found one directed to herself. It was not a very common occurrence; her parents wrote very rarely, and her old school-friends were capricious correspondents. She turned the letter over and over again in her hands, wondering from whom it could be. Monsieur Legros caught sight of the handwriting as she did so, and started.

"Who has been writing to you, Blanche?" he said, quickly.

"I do not know—I was wondering."

"Perhaps you had better give me the letter," he said, quickly. Then seeing her look of astonishment, he added—"No, no; read it yourself."

She opened her letter and read; presently she looked up with a little cry.

"Camille," she said, "Jean writes to tell me that his uncle, the great *épicier* at Nantes, has died and left him a fortune of 5,000 francs a year. Ah, but that is good news!"

"Does he say any more?" asked Monsieur Legros, rather huskily.

"Yes, yes, I have not finished yet," and she went on reading. Suddenly the colour forsook her face, leaving it ashy pale, and she looked up suddenly. "Camille, you knew this; and you have asked this poor boy for his money."

"I have advised him as to its investment, certainly."

"This must be stopped," cried Blanche. "He must not be ruined; he, an orphan!"

"You do not know what you are talking about, Madame," shrieked Madame Berthe, suddenly joining in the conversation.

Blanche rose to her feet; there was a dignity in her graceful figure they had not seen before; she swept her hand past, showing the rows of houses: "See," she said sadly, "are they not all empty?"

"Yes, and empty they will remain as long as you conspire to ruin us," cried Madame Berthe, nodding her head up and down.

Blanche turned piteously to her husband, but in his face was no sign of relenting; he looked dark and sullen.

"You will not ruin this poor little Jean?" she said.

"What do you wish?" he cried, suddenly. "I have no power in the matter; I merely told him how in five years he can make 50 per cent. on his money. If he choose to accept it, so be it; it is no affair of mine."

"It must be stopped."

"Who will stop it?" cried Legros, fiercely.

"I will." And poor Blanche could bear no more, but sank back in her chair white and gasping. Camille Legros was livid with rage, but he controlled himself with some difficulty, and did not speak. Madame Berthe, unhindered by her son, poured out a torrent of abuse and violent language. In vain Blanche turned her pathetic eyes from her angry mother-in-law to her husband, he offered her no protection, and after a moment or two he grew tired of the shrill voice and strode away.

Presently Madame Berthe changed her tone, and this was even more difficult to bear. "You will not ruin your husband, *ma petite bru?*" she whined. "He works so hard and hopes so much, and now all is ready, the great work is nearly accomplished, and only a little money—a very little money—wanted to keep all afloat till the tenants come; and it is a certainty—do you not see it is a certainty of success; there can be no doubt whatever about it. You, whom he loves so much, and whom he took without one penny in your pocket, surely you will not turn against him?"

"But see," cried poor Blanche, in despair; "why do you say all this to me? Have I not as much interest in St. Didier as yourself? Would not your ruin be my ruin also? But I must think of Jean—the poor little Jean, who has neither father nor mother to care for him, and who has always been as a child to the 'Pie Blanche.'"

"But when Camille himself tells you that he will guarantee him eight per cent."

"Alas! alas!" sighed Blanche.

"Then you will not hinder him?" persisted Madame Berthe.

"I must, I must!"

She broke away from her mother-in-law and went out—anywhere out of the house, she thought, as she went down the steep steps down the face of the cliff to the sea. It was a wild, gusty day; the wind nearly blew her off her feet, and sand filled her eyes and mouth.

"Life is not very happy," thought poor Blanche. She hated the sea with an unacknowledged hatred—the bustle and fuss of it—the constant changes. She was not accustomed to them, and they had no charms to the little *bourgeoise* who had hitherto spent so calm and monotonous a life.

Presently she found a sheltered spot, a sort of cave hollowed out of the rock. She was out of the wind here, and she sat down and smoothed her hair and recovered her breath. The whole conversation she had just gone through was most painfully distinct upon her memory. She clasped her hands before her eyes, and prayed that she might have strength to do what was right—that she might not shrink from her duty, however painful it might be to her. She must write to Jean, and warn him of the difficulties St. Didier was contending with—of how likely it was that a great *faillite* was at hand. She knew that she could trust her cousin, and that he would not betray her secret to any one. Then she rose up and went home comforted.

Blanche had no wish to write secretly, or to do anything underhand, but her task was more difficult than she had anticipated. Madame Berthe set herself as a sort of spy upon all her actions; she never left her for a moment, except when Legros was at home, and Blanche knew that Rosalie had orders to stop any letter she might write.

She grew pale and thin from the constant anxiety, and her sleep was broken and feverish. At last she contrived to write her letter unseen, and now came the difficulty of posting it. She adopted at last the simplest mode of all. Walking home from church on her husband's arm, she quietly posted it in the letter-box.

"What letter is that?" he cried, suddenly.

"My letter to Jean," almost whispered Blanche in great terror. He almost threw her off his arm and walked off alone. Poor little Blanche stood for a moment dizzy and aghast. This seemed like an insult before the whole congregation. Two peasant women passing nudged each other, and one or two rude boys giggled and whispered.

With burning cheeks, and eyes so full of hot tears that she could hardly see her way, Blanche went slowly home.

During the next two days her husband hardly spoke to her; and she had a sense of guiltiness towards him that she could not throw off, and that was intensely painful.

About a week later, Blanche received an answer from her cousin. When her husband took the letter

from among his own, her heart beat so fast that she hardly knew how to bear it. He handed it to her without a word, and she could hardly summon up courage enough to open it.

Legros watched her from under his eyebrows; but he could make nothing out from her countenance, for he did not understand its varying expression. At last she started up and handed him the letter. She stood beside him with glistening eyes and clasped hands, saying eagerly, "Oh, I am so glad—so glad!"

He read it slowly: "My dear Blanche—I am infinitely touched by the goodness of your letter to me, and of the frank warning you give me against insecure investment of my little fortune; but in this matter I must have my own way, in spite of the worldly wisdom of your advice—for which I thank you with my whole heart. Of course I realize the risk; but sometimes some thousands of francs just at the right moment will turn the scale and save the whole affair. I have an impression that this will be the case at St. Didier, and that before many years are past we shall all be millionaires. Present my compliments to your good husband," etc.

This was the letter. When he had read it, Legros put his arm round Blanche and kissed her. Madame Berthe was less forgiving.

"Ah, ah!" she muttered: "so you did not quite succeed with your little calumnies, after all, *ma chère*."

Preparations for the tenants who were not forth-

coming continued even more actively than before. Legros became almost reckless in the additions he made to the comfort of each house; curtains and sofas and chairs arrived from Paris; clocks and ornaments.

One morning the American lady was discovered to have gone—disappeared in the night; and nothing more was heard either of herself or her year's rent. Still Monsieur Legros was as sanguine as ever; but as the summer months wore on, his head became plentifully streaked with grey.

Monsieur Léon stayed on. How he kept body and soul together, perhaps Blanche could have told better than any one else; but his little rent was paid punctually to the day, and he threw himself headlong into the scheme. "It is always well to be first in the field in a grand new 'enterprise,'" he repeated, with almost as much belief in St. Didier as ever. When all hope of letting for the bathing season was over, Legros let freely to a strange set of people, without care or precaution with regard to character or even appearances. The little town soon swarmed with questionable Parisians, who enjoyed themselves beyond measure, and paid only a nominal rent.

"It is intolerable," grumbled Madame Berthe. "But at all events they air the new houses."

It was a great relief to Blanche when they went away, and all the shutters were put up, and the winter drew near again.

"I wish I could help you, Camille," said she, wistfully, one day, putting her hand timidly on his arm.

"I think it must be the want of a theatre!" he cried. "I will build one."

"Oh, no, no, not yet. Have a little patience."

"You always try to restrain me," he said, rather fretfully. "Don't you see that one must do one's utmost now? and we have no middle course—we must sink or swim." And the theatre was talked of, and planned out roughly that very night.

Camille began to suffer both in body and mind from the long-continued strain of anxiety and disappointment, and the winter set in. New prospectuses were sent out, the houses were offered at the most tempting prices for the winter. The price tempted one or two very poor families with many children; but when their term was up, the damage that had to be repaired encroached much on the small rent.

But with spring courage came back, and even Blanche herself seemed to arouse suddenly.

"You will let me help you this year, *mon ami*," she said, eagerly.

"I do not see what you can do," was the gloomy answer.

"I will do my very best," she said, gaily. "But first of all, may I take a journey all by myself?"

"By yourself!"

"Of course I shall take a *bonne* with me."

"She can have Rosalie, of course," said Madame Berthe, to whom Blanche had confided her little scheme, which was a very slender one indeed; namely, to go to Tours, and dine two or three times

at the *table d'hôte* among the many English—to travel perhaps a very little from one town to another, and try to lead attention, already turning to the seaside, towards St. Didier. It was a chance. Blanche reckoned on her powers of description, and on the certainty that, if she could only get the people to come they would stay. Madame Berthe reckoned on her daughter-in-law's beauty and winning manner, though she did not say so; and she also felt certain that to see St. Didier was all that was necessary.

To Legros naturally the plan appeared entirely childish and even absurd. This was not the way business should be carried on. However, he good-naturedly yielded to their wishes, only stipulating that Madame Berthe herself should accompany Blanche instead of Rosalie. The poor old woman prepared with many deep groans; she had taken but one journey within her life, the memorable one that brought her to St. Didier, and she felt low and unhappy at the prospect of starting afresh. However, her devotion to her son's cause would have carried her through the mysteries of Isis even, so she made her preparations with praiseworthy courage.

"Tell me, Camille," said Blanche, just on the eve of starting—"tell me the sort of tenants you want."

"Look!" said Monsieur Legros, pointing through the window from one house to another. "In that blue house I want a *père de famille;* he may have from four to eight children, who require education. In the pink house, *les Rosiers*, I want a lady and two daughters. That house with the arcade is a *châlet de*

garçon ; the smoking-room is perfect. I want educating families especially. There," he said, exultantly, "that villa is just the one for a young *ménage.*"

"I see," said Blanche, eagerly. "But I hope for most success among the large families."

"And those are the best of all," answered her husband. "But of all others a Scotch family is the best; for I hear that when they settle, many of their friends, uncles, cousins, and other relations come and settle round them."

Blanche and Madame Berthe went away with their minds full of large Scotch families.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME BERTHE and Blanche arrived at Nantes, their first destination, on the 28th of May, the evening before the *Fête Dieu.* They had taken a room in one of the best hotels, and found to their great delight that it was full of foreigners, all crowded there to see the famous *fête.*

Table d'hôte was at six o'clock. Now that the moment had come, Blanche was very much frightened, and clung to Madame Berthe's arm, who, very tremulous herself, managed to say sharp, cross things in an undertone as they went in. Blanche found herself seated by a young girl, almost as shy as herself, and unmistakably English. In spite of many sharp little pinches from her mother-in-law, she could not make up her mind to begin the conversation until the soup was done ; then she asked the young lady very timidly whether she liked France. The answer, in very broken French, was bright and cheery ; and the blue eyes of the English girl, Meta Brownlow, looked so sweet and sunshiny, that they soon became quite friendly, discussing different places, and making comparisons. Blanche found that her new acquaintance was anxious to understand all about the *fête* on the

morrow, so as to enjoy it thoroughly; and it ended in an engagement to meet the English family at the cathedral at high mass the following morning.

The *Fête Dieu* at Nantes is supposed to be the most beautiful in France. The English travellers were full of admiration as they emerged into the *Place* in front of the cathedral just in time to see the great procession leave the east door. The whole thing formed one of those brilliant pictures which remain in the memory for years; the streets and houses all draped with white, scarlet, and blue, the draperies covered with hanging wreaths; triumphal arches overhead, from which hung baskets of lovely flowers; the whole streets strewn thickly with rushes: then the gorgeous procession itself filing solemnly out from the dark background of the dim old church; hundreds of little white and scarlet boys with stiff quaint rose-wreaths on their heads; girls in white, with long white floating veils; the gleaming of military pomp, and a fine clash of martial music as the regiment slowly passed; then women in white again, and a long line of monks with bare feet and heads, and brown rough habits; then the acolytes in gorgeous dalmatics of cloth-of-gold, carrying banners, crosses, shrines—gold, crimson, purple—the brilliant colouring growing more vivid, till suddenly the bells all rolled out with a crashing sound. Like one man, every one in the vast crowd sank on their knees; twenty choir-boys in scarlet and white stood facing the great door, swinging incense in silver censers, their long chains flashing in the sun; then the chanting began, and out into the

light came swaying the huge gold and silver canopy, and the Host, carried by the bishop, passed slowly amidst the prostrate crowd.

Blanche rose from her knees. "It was beautiful, was it not?" she cried, eagerly. She was almost breathless with the admiration and excitement she felt. The blue cloudless sky, the masses of roses, honeysuckle, and white pinks, the great red peonies, all added brilliance and sweet fragrance to the scene, and the thin blue clouds of incense dispersed very slowly in the clear air.

Blanche had won her way completely with the English family, who were delighted with all they saw and heard; not till evening did she venture to broach the subject which lay so near her heart. Then when again seated at *table d'hôte*, she began to talk about St. Didier. She heard with a throb of her heart that was almost painful, that the Brownlows were thinking of spending the summer months at Dieppe. "If you would only try St. Didier," she said, wistfully. "It would be something quite new for you; and there is such a good professor there, if you want music and singing."

Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow talked it over that evening. They had been at Dieppe two years running, and were quite prepared to like the prospect of a change. They talked it over also with an old Scotch lady, a Miss Macdonald, who was present with a very delicate niece. They were all sociable people, and they made a plan to go together to St. Didier at the end of the week, to see whether they liked it.

Blanche threw herself into Madame Berthe's arms that night, and said, "I knew it would be so! I knew it! I prayed so hard at the 'Grande Messe' this morning."

"Do not hope too much," said the old woman in her grumbling voice; "remember how many people came and looked at St. Didier and went away again."

"Ah! but they will not this time," said Blanche, hopefully; "I have prayed too much."

There was something in the sweet bright faith that shone in Blanche's lovely eyes that checked Madame Berthe, and she did not give vent to the peevish doubt which rose in her mind.

The next morning they left Nantes and went on to Tours; Blanche determining to return to St. Didier in time to prepare for the appearance of her new acquaintances. There were many English at Tours, and Blanche managed to talk of St. Didier to two people: one an old gentleman who was not at all likely to want sea-bathing; the other a French lady, who drank in her description of the place eagerly, and questioned her methodically as to prices, advantages, and terms of leases, ending by promising to come and see the place during the course of the month.

The old gentleman, Dr. Price, shook his head, and laughed a little over Blanche's description of the good bathing. She had repeated her little story till she almost knew it by heart, making no secret of her own deep interest in the success of the place. She told every one that it was all new, quite new; that, in

fact, that was one of its advantages. After that Blanche and Madame Berthe returned home.

Monsieur Legros heard all that they had to tell with great interest; he gave Blanche *carte blanche* to promise all they asked for, to the expected visitors, if only they would come and take the houses.

On one fine Thursday evening they arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow and Miss Macdonald; they had left all the young people behind, being very doubtful as to St. Didier.

"It is probably a wild-goose chase," said Mr. Brownlow, as they drove up to the hotel. "But that little woman was quite irresistible."

"How wonderfully sweet and fresh the air is!" answered his wife. "I long to get down on to those beautiful sands."

The next morning was beautiful, the sky cloudlessly blue, the sea almost purple, bounded by the band of snow-white foam which outlined the grand rocks; the pink, and blue, and green houses looked gay and sunshiny; and Blanche, looking very dainty and pretty, did the honours of the houses one after another. They looked at so many that her large eyes began to look wistful and startled. Was it to be a failure after all?

That day passed and the night came. Nothing was said. The difficulty was Miss Macdonald, who could not make up her mind as to the exposed situation of the place being good for her invalid niece.

The omnibus that evening brought a new visitor to the hotel, Dr. Price himself. He merely ordered

his portmanteau to be taken in, and immediately walked off down to the sands. The whole party met at *table d'hôte*, and Miss Macdonald was seated next to the Doctor.

In answer to her hesitating question of what he thought of the place, his answer was enthusiastic.

"Why, ma'am, it fulfils every sanitary condition! The right aspect,—everything! I do not see what any one could wish for more."

After another long consultation two notes were despatched directed to Monsieur Legros by Mr. Brownlow and Miss Macdonald.

Blanche watched her husband as he read them, and read the answer in his face.

"We have began at last," he said, and for a moment covered his face with his hands.

"It is all right?" she whispered, for her voice seemed to go.

"It is all right; they wish to take the blue house, and the English Miss Macdonald 'les Rosiers.'"

The next morning Dr. Price called on Monsieur Legros and engaged the little house with the arcades, not for the summer, but for a year. He then asked for the refusal of two or three other houses pending letters from England.

"I have long been looking for just such a place as this for my patients," he said, pompously.

In a few weeks St. Didier was all alive. The Scotch tradition proved true: a large family of brothers and sisters followed Miss Macdonald; they brought friends of their own; the place began to be

talked about. Dr. Price proved to be the most important fish that the net of Blanche's charms had landed. He was a physician of considerable eminence, who, having made his fortune, had retired into private life, reserving to himself only a certain number of favourite patients. He seized upon St. Didier, and at once made it into his hobby. He recommended it, he superintended the drainage, he caused baths—douches, hot salt baths, and other invalid luxuries—to be established; he established himself there; and before another year was over, Monsieur Legros had not a single house or apartment unlet on his hands.

Then, and not till then, did Monsieur and Madame Benoit come to St. Didier, accompanied by Jean—Jean, who had outgrown his first love, and who had now a moustache. He was prepared to ignore the sentiment which had made him persevere in his speculation in St. Didier, and was proud of boasting that he had had the foresight to see what would really come of it.

Madame Berthe continued to be very cross, but never with Blanche now.

"Of all my Camille's speculations, thou hast turned out the best," she said once to her daughter-in-law; and there was little doubt that Legros thought so also.

They stood together one day, looking down on the little crowd assembled listening to a band, all gay, bright, and *riant*, and Blanche pressed her husband's hand.

"It is a great success, *mon ami*, is it not?" she said. "And for success one must thank God."

"I will; I do," he answered, earnestly.

Legros was a kinder and a better man for the success of his Great Speculation.

Stories of the Future.

LADY-HELPS.

THE LADY CANDIDATE.

LADY-HELPS.

CHAPTER I.

"TIME'S up, miss: look alive! First or third?"

"Third."

"All right; here you are!"

A shrill whistle, and the train on the Midland line steamed out of the station. Bertha Fitzherbert, a slender girl with large dark eyes, seated herself modestly in the corner, and settled her tidy little black bag beside her. The pace increased; and out of the dark station—for it was afternoon, and a November day—they emerged into bright light, and Bertha found time to reconnoitre her fellow-travellers. There were only two: a young lady in deep mourning, with a thick black veil which concealed her face; and an honest-looking stout countryman, whose rounded shoulders and horny hands betrayed him more at home in work-a-day than Sunday clothes.

The train was going very fast, and the young lady in black sat facing the engine.

Bertha bent forward and said in her gentle voice, "Will you not change places with me or sit beside me?"

The young lady looked up gratefully and moved to the seat next to Bertha the countryman composed himself to sleep, and the train rushed on.

Bertha sat looking out of the window at all the flying objects: trees, hedgerows, lazy cattle, peaceful cottages—all passed like a dream before her, blurred and indistinct; through the rushing sound echoed the numerous voices of her home, merry children's laughter, the father's deep voice, the mother's sweet tones—ah, that mother! Down Bertha's cheek stole two large tears and dropped with a pat on her kid glove; her companion gave a little start and watched her anxiously; more visions were stealing past—a great beech-tree, a white pony leaning over the hurdles, two boys with sunny hair and rosy cheeks perched in the highest branches, and someone else caressing the pony's mane as she fed it with chopped-up carrots—voices shouting "George! George!"—and a bright pink flush dyed Bertha's face. Her companion gave another little start, and watched more closely.

Now came another change—a look as of a sharp, sudden pain, contracted brow, clenched lips, and two more tears, hotter, slower in falling than the former ones. Suddenly Bertha is startled to find some one kissing her once, twice, three times, and a voice repeating, "Please, please, don't cry." She turned round in her astonishment to see the veil thrown up, and the sweetest, prettiest little fair-haired face looking up to her with a quiver in the sensitive lips, as if to say, "I know this is a great liberty; but we are both young girls, so please do not mind."

Bertha smiled through her tears and kissed her warmly. "How good you are!" she said, simply.

"I cannot bear to see you cry; now I will wipe all those tears away. Are you happier now?"

"Yes, thank you, dear. I won't cry any more. Tell me what your name is?"

"Amy Gordon, and I will tell you all about myself if you promise to be happy."

"Do," said Bertha, leaning back with a sigh; "I shall be so glad to talk to you a little. Are you travelling quite alone?"

"Yes; and echo says, are you?"

"Yes; but I am older than you are."

"Are you sure? I am older than you think; I am eighteen."

"And I am twenty-one; but I have travelled alone several times now, and am no longer frightened."

"That is very brave of you; it terrifies me dreadfully. Mamma always laughs at me for being such a coward. I don't know how I shall get on at Murch Hall," and she sighed.

"Murch Hall! you do not mean that you are going there?"

"Yes, I am. Do you know Lady Murch?"

"No; but I suppose I shall know her, for I am going to be one of her lady-helps."

"Oh, how very, very glad I am; I am going also."

"Really and truly! this is delightful! Have you ever been in service before? can you tell me anything about it?"

"No; I have never been out before," said Amy,

gravely. "We all lived at home at Stanton Rectory until my father died. We thought he was very rich indeed, for we always had all that we wanted; but something happened. I will not explain how it turned out that we had only two hundred a-year to live upon, and that we must work for ourselves. There are eleven of us, five boys and six girls."

"What did you do?"

"Mary and Joanna are governesses; Meta and Rosie are both married. I was the difficulty, for I did so hate teaching; but I heard of Lady Murch's situation, through Miss Belfort—you know whom I mean? —member for Kingtonville; and though mamma only half liked it, she let me come. I am to be pastry-maid; it is such pretty work, and I can do it beautifully now."

"I am to be second housemaid," said Bertha; "and I am afraid I know very little about it; but I suppose one can learn easily."

"Have you had any lessons?"

"Mamma's maid showed me how to make a bed as well as she could; but she knew very little herself, for she had never been anything but a lady's-maid until we were ruined."

"Ah!"

"It was about six months ago. All the children are provided for—we have the great comfort of having rich relations; but we elder ones must work. My two brothers were obliged to leave Eton." Her eyes filled with tears, but she went on bravely: "I am only to get eighteen pounds a-year. I know it is much

higher wages than a real housemaid would get, who did not know her work; but it seems very little, does it not?"

"I am to have sixteen, and to rise if I do well," said Amy.

"Well, it will be one burden less for my father at home," said Bertha, cheerfully.

"Yes, that is the great comfort; and I am determined to think it all great fun," said Amy.

"I shall, too, as soon as I can forget Jack's face when he showed me his leaving-books," said Bertha.

"Where are they going now?"

"To Brussels, at first, then Heidelberg, or some other German college. I daresay it will all turn out for the best."

"Of course it will; and how proud you will be of their German and their great mustachios!"

"Freddy did not mind half so much as Jack."

"If you get to be head-housemaid, you will be able to help them."

"Yes; that I know will be my great delight."

"I wonder how much I shall be able to spare of my sixteen pounds," said Amy, thoughtfully.

"About six, I should think; but we cannot judge till we know what our expenses will be."

"I wonder if there is any one else in this train going to Murch Hall."

"I wonder. It will be very exciting first meeting all our fellow-servants, and a very anxious moment also. Here we are at a station; look at that gorgeous woman!"

The door of a first-class carriage was thrown open with a bang, and a woman stood on the door-step, shouting out, "Hi! hi! you boy! give us a 'Woman's Parliamentary Journal.' How much?—threepence? —twopence too much for such a dirty number;" and she drew back her green silk gown and black gloves into obscurity, holding her paper gingerly. Her figure was immediately replaced in the doorway by that of a young man, apparently about five-and-twenty, clad in a light grey shooting-costume,— "Boy! 'Times' and 'Pall Mall.'"

"We shall be glad of some news, shan't we, Mr. Herbert?" said the lady in green silk.

"There is nothing in the papers just now," he answered, yawning. "By-the-bye, I suppose one sees the papers at Murch Hall?"

"Bless you! of course you do; two is took in regular for the servants."

The "Times" twitched, and Mr. Herbert unceremoniously threw himself back and began to read.

"Well," said Mrs. Jones, "I *do* think."

"What do you think?" said the young gentleman, lazily.

"I was thinking that there are some beautiful advertisements this time."

A lady who had been seated quite quietly in one corner of the carriage now suddenly started up— "Excuse me, ma'am," she said; "only for one moment;" and with a dexterous twitch she possessed herself of the "Female Parliamentary Journal," much to Mrs. Jones's indignation. She endeavoured to

stretch after it; but the lady in the corner placed a hand of iron on her soft, fat arm, and went on reading and holding her at the same time, murmuring, "I will not detain it a moment—not half a minute, my good woman."

For about five minutes this continued, Mrs. Jones speechless with displeasure. Then the lady loosed her with a suddenness which brought her anger to a crisis, and quite unconscious of offence, began speaking in a loud, clear, oratorical tone—

"Sir," she said, addressing herself to Herbert, who, intensely amused, had been watching the scene, "a circumstance has again occurred which has much disturbed my serenity."

"Indeed! I am very sorry to hear it."

"It is these advertisements — these intolerable advertisements."

"Strong language," murmured the gentleman.

"What do you say?"

"I am all attention, I said—nothing else."

"These advertisements that constantly appear in the 'Female Parliamentary Journal'—now, what is the 'Female Parliamentary Journal?' answer me that. The 'Female Parliamentary Journal' is the organ, the mouthpiece of the female parliamentary mind. Now, what is the female parliamentary mind? The female parliamentary mind is the modern soul or essence of politics; therefore political should be its articles, political should be its leaders, political should be its notices, and—political should be its advertisements."

"I am sure the advertisements is beautiful," said Mrs. Jones.

The lady deigned no response but a withering look. Raising one finger in the air, she continued—"Now, sir, the females who enter upon the parliamentary career cease to be women in——"

"Hear, hear!"

"What do you say, sir?"

"Only, very true—very true indeed."

"Cease to be women in the commonly-accepted sense of that term of opprobrium; they are no longer women, but females—refined, superior, intellectual, full of the cares and responsibilities of empire. Of what possible use can advertisements such as these be to such females?—'Nash's Frilling, the most durable and satisfactory trimming for ladies', children's, and infants' wardrobes.' Are not advertisements meant to be of use to the purchasers and readers? Should they not be characteristic of the journal in which they appear? Again, 'Hair! hair! hair! Ask your perfumer,' etc., etc. Further on, 'Shoeberry & Co., limited,—Sewing machines of all kinds.' And look at this!—'Jenkin's Children's Powders.' What have Members of Parliament, what have political journals to do with these things? leave them to nurses and seamstresses. 'Dr. Bethem's Food for Infants, Children, and Invalids.' It is unworthy, useless, revolting. What have infants to do with Parliament? what part do children and invalids play in the ever-revolving political sphere?—answer me that."

"It does seem extraordinary. May I ask, madam, if you are in the House?"

"No, I am not; but I am agent for this part of the country, and now on my way to Firton for the impending election."

"Indeed! Do you expect much of a contest?"

"A certain John Bullus, Esq., has come forward in opposition to Mrs. Lane—a person of no local weight, but a good speaker; and I hear that he is quite determined to carry the seat;" and she laughed grimly.

"Mrs. Lane has sat before?"

"She was returned without a contest three years ago."

"And you consider her pretty safe?"

"I will answer no indiscreet questions."

"Ahem!" Mr. Herbert returned to his paper.

"And may I ask, sir, if you have the distinction of writing M.P. after your name?"

"Not I! I am Sir Joseph Murch's new footman."

"Gentleman help, you mean?"

"All the same thing."

"Pardon me; in a few words I will endeavour——"

"Firton, Firton!" shouted the nasal tones of the Firton porter; and Mr. Herbert, with extraordinary courtesy, jumped up to take down his fellow-traveller's umbrella-case and macintosh, and draw a bundle of rugs from under the seat.

"Another time we will finish our little talk," she said, as she got out of the train. The station was small, so that Herbert could see a very high smart-

looking gig awaiting her. He watched with a mixture of astonishment and amusement the dexterity with which she mounted it, drew a little packet from her pocket, lit a fragrant cigar, and taking the reins from the small groom's hands, drove off down the road.

"That's Miss Highclere," said Mrs. Jones, wiping her brow. "You'll see enough of her; she's always staying with my lady."

"Heaven help us!" muttered Herbert from behind his newspaper.

"Yes, that you will; it was all along of her this new idea of lady-helps—lady-helps, indeed! taking the bread out of folks' mouths."

"Now, come, cook," said the young gentleman; "I want to be left in peace."

"All right, footman! I like you a-calling of me —cook," she said, wrathfully; but Mr. Herbert had tucked up his legs, settled his plaid round him, and was apparently in the land of Nod.

CHAPTER II.

IT was growing very dark when Bertha discovered by a glance at her watch that they were due at Merton Junction. The two girls sat holding each other's hands very tightly. A shrill whistle, slackening pace, and the train stopped. "Merton Junction. All change here for Aberville, Charlton, and Dorcaster." And cold and shivering, the travellers bundled out into the raw November mist. The train, with its lights gleaming like crimson eyes, hurried off into the night, leaving four passengers standing a little disconsolately on the platform.

"I wonder if anything has come to meet us," said Amy, timidly.

"There's a bus here from Murch Hall, if any o' you gents be a-going there," said a friendly porter. Mrs. Jones pressed forwards, "All right! it's come for me: here, take my bag, and just see the luggage in."

The girls followed her through the station to the door.

"Are you going to Murch Hall?" she asked, tossing her head superciliously.

"Yes, if you please; is there room?" said Bertha.

"Room! yes, there's room enough; plenty of room for you too, Mr. Herbert."

"Now, Mrs. Jones, look sharp," said the coachman, tightening the reins. "You'll come on the box and have a weed, won't you?" he said to Herbert.

"With all my heart."

The little omnibus bounded forwards, steadied itself, and spun along the road at a pace which made the three women hold on by the seats.

"Here we are!" said the coachman, throwing down the reins and jumping off. "Will you come with me, Mr. Herbert, and leave the women-folks to themselves?" Fortunately a helper was ready to stand before the steaming horses, and another to open the omnibus-door and let out the tired travellers. They descended at a small low door, followed Mrs. Jones down a stone passage, and found themselves in a large stone-paved lower hall, out of which opened to the right and left the various very comfortable offices.

Here they were met by a tall old gentleman, somewhat bent by age, with a most kindly expression on his face as he came forward to meet the new arrivals.

"I hope you have done all your commissions, Mrs. Jones," he said.

"Yes, I have, sir, and a busy two days I have had; and I will not say but I shall be glad of my tea now, Colonel Clarence."

"And you must be tired, too," said he, very kindly, to the two girls. "I have ordered your tea at once,

and told my lady that she had better not see you till you are a little rested."

"Oh, thank you."

"Colonel Clarence is always addressed as sir," said Mrs. Jones, sharply.

"I beg your pardon," faltered Bertha.

"No, no, come along now, and we will see how we can make you comfortable. Miss Gwendoline," he called out suddenly, "will you show these ladies their rooms?"

"Si, signore," said a voice; and out of the kitchen came a tall girl in a white apron and bib, with a most coquettish cap on her black hair; she put her hands into the little pockets of her apron and danced up to them.

"I hope you will like your rooms," she said, "and above all, that you won't mind sharing one between you."

"Now, don't you be a-putting of them up to——"

"The servants are waiting for you, Mrs. Jones," said Gwendoline, haughtily; and Mrs. Jones departed, wrathfully.

Their new acquaintance led the way up stairs that seemed to be endless—stairs that passed through a stone age, a wooden age, and finally an iron age—and landed our travellers, giddy from the tiny corkscrew ascent, in a sort of rabbit warren of rooms under the roof.

"This is your room," said their guide, opening a door and showing them a large roomy garret with a sloping roof, two very inviting little white beds, and

furniture of polished deal, which shone with rubbing. "And I hope you will be comfortable here; my room opens into it, and I shall come in and see you sometimes in bed. I am so glad you are come."

"We want so much to know what it will be like," said Bertha.

"I will tell you about the servants in half-a-dozen words. Colonel Clarence is the butler, and an old dear he is, always a refuge in times of direful trouble. The housekeeper is my lady herself, for no one else will undertake the job. The cook is Mrs. Jones, and Mrs. Jones is the thorn in the flesh of the establishment; Sir Joseph is philanthropic — Sir Joseph is likewise an epicure. Lady-helps are all very well, but no single lady-help can be found who can cook well. One gentleman-cook appeared, but he asked £500 a-year, and could never make a plain pudding without champagne, so he was given up, and Mrs. Jones rules the roast. The kitchen-maids were always leaving till I came, and as I am determined with her, she respects me."

"I hope she will be kind to me," said Amy.

"I will see after you—we are two kitchen-maids, scullery-maid, and pastry-maid; my underling is a nice merry school-girl, and we have great fun together. Now for you, Miss Fitzherbert—there are three housemaids and a head one; the head is Miss Price; she was once a governess, but failed, as she is such a fidget that no one would have her; she has nerves, and always thinks every one is going to offend her."

"Oh, dear!"

"The two other housemaids are sisters, the Miss Burdens, who took to service by their clergyman's advice, because they were always quarrelling."

"And then?"

"There is Miss Murch's maid, a real civil French lady's-maid, who finds it very *triste* to have no companion. Lady Murch's maid is a retired officer's widow, who does nothing but cry — Mrs. Lurgan. Then there are the men. Captain Lawrence, the coachman, who has only one leg; Mr. Fox and Mr. Herbert, two footmen; Colonel Clarence, butler; Arthur Macdown, Sir Joseph's valet; and a boy who wears yellow stockings—I suspect him of having been a blue-coat."

"Was it Mr. Herbert who came down from London with us?"

"Yes; we have never been able to find a footman to stay as yet, because Mr. Fox will not do a single thing, and the second footman does it all. I hope Mr. Herbert likes work?"

They all laughed. "It is all very ridiculous, is it not?" said Gwendoline.

"Very; one does not quite realise it yet."

A comfortable tea was set in the room called the lady-helps' parlour when the two travellers came downstairs. Colonel Clarence presided, pouring out tea as skilfully as a lady would have done, and supplying them liberally with bread and butter.

"Our regular tea-time is five o'clock," he said;

"but I daresay you are just as well pleased to be too late to meet anybody to-night."

Tea over, he advised them to wash up the things, and said that he would now find out whether Lady Murch could receive them. Bertha went to look for hot water, and Amy flew upstairs for some aprons, highly amused that their work should have begun at once.

They were hard at work with the cups and saucers when Colonel Clarence came back.

"My lady wishes to see you now," he said.

"Can't we just finish this?"

"Miss Gwendoline will do that. Miss Gwen!"

Gwendoline came flying down the passage.

"Can you finish these things, you wild child?" asked the colonel, patting her cheek.

"Oh, yes, in a moment!" and pushing back her sleeves she put her hands immediately to their task.

Bertha and Amy felt very shy as they followed the butler upstairs. The back staircase led out into a large dining-room, the table laid for about twenty people and blazing with lights; they crossed a couple of dark ante-rooms, went down a long corridor, and followed their guide into a large half-lighted drawing-room.

"Will you wait here?" he said, and vanished through another door. They waited about ten minutes, when the door opened with a rush, and a young lady came in.

"How do you do?" she said, cordially; and without shaking hands squatted down on the white fur mat in front of the fire.

"Mamma will be here directly. I am Mary Murch, and I hope we shall be great friends. I am always running in and out of the kitchen, in fact we all are, all day long, much to Mrs. Jones's disgust; but it is great fun."

"I should think it did not advance the work much," said Bertha.

"That is what mamma says; but all the same, if she will carry out these eccentric schemes of hers, she must experience the practical working of them."

"Are all the servants——"

"Servants! Ye powers, what an expression! There are no servants in this house; but it is so long to speak of the gentlemen-helps and the lady-helps distinctively, that they have been called among us the Troglodites—a most graceful and classical term. Here is mamma."

The door through which Colonel Clarence had gone was thrown open, and Lady Murch sailed in. It was dark, and the firelight flickered, but Bertha and Amy were aware of a stately presence tending towards six feet high, of yards of Bismarck-coloured silk, of *embonpoint* and shadowiness of outline in the twilight room, and of a deep masculine voice.

"I am glad to see you," she said; "I hope you have been welcomed and made as comfortable as circumstances permit in my abode."

"We have indeed."

"Be seated, and I will endeavour to put before you a few of the theories upon which the general management of this house is conducted." They sat down

reluctantly, for Lady Murch's large presence stood looming before them, and she waved aside her daughter's offer of a chair.

"When I first followed the example of so many wiser and better than myself, and determined to select my household from the higher ranks, I began in a manner which it proved impossible to continue, by giving salaries such as gentlemen and gentlewomen might find it worth their while to accept. Sir Joseph rebelled; our fortune is large, but needs must be colossal to support such a tax, so I regret that I cannot offer much more than the ordinary rate of wa—of salaries."

"Forgive me," said Bertha, a little proudly; "but I am inexperienced; my wages are to be those of an experienced housemaid. I cannot accept so much when my services are not worth it."

"Nor I," said Amy, eagerly.

"Nonsense," said Lady Murch. "You see that the advantage of having refined and agreeable gentlewomen more than makes up for the deficiency of experience."

"But I fear that it will not make better housemaids," said Bertha, smiling.

"That is my affair, and it is settled. Now to continue: at first my wish was that the Troglodites should have a table exactly similar to our own; but again," and she waved her hand with a stately gesture—"again Sir Joseph rebelled—in short, it proved too expensive; so I have been obliged to vary the Troglodites' table very little from what it used to

be in the days of servants—excellent meat at all times, but not such little luxuries as soups, jellies, creams, sweetbread, or *entrées*. As it is, I find the consumption of food so much less than it used to be, that that alone takes from the increase of expense of the new system. Then again, tallow candles."

"Mamma," said Mary, entreatingly, "I am sure that these ladies will mind nothing."

"I hope they will be forbearing," said her mother, graciously. "I regret that I cannot see more of my lady-helps, but I am overpowered with business, being in the chair of so many public meetings and on several committees, besides having (perhaps foolishly) consented to write an article now and then in the 'Eve's Magazine.' But there is no want of society, for all the guests staying in the house are as much in the kitchens and offices as in the drawing-rooms. Mrs. Lurgan and the Misses Burden dine with us to-night. To-morrow I hope you will both favour us with your company. I always make a point of inviting a few members of the household every night. Colonel Clarence dines to-night; I confess that always makes me a little anxious, for Mr. Fox is not a very good waiter, and Sir Joseph is very particular. Good night; and pray let me know if you have not everything you wish."

"Yes, I hope you will," said Mary, cordially, as Bertha and Amy left the room.

CHAPTER III.

"MR. STUART, will you take Miss Murch? Sir Frederick, allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Reid; Lady Snowdon, an old friend of your husband's, Sir Frederick's college friend, Colonel Clarence; Mr. Reid, Mrs. Lurgan," etc.

The guests at Murch Hall passed two and two into the dining-room.

"I hope, my dear Lady Goodchild, that you have good news from Firton," said Sir Joseph, depositing a graceful lady in a chair at his side.

"Yes, thank you, Sir Joseph," simpered the lady; "a fine boy and doing remarkably well. I said to George Lane, I had seldom seen my daughter, Mrs. Lane, look better; and it is such a good thing to have it over before the election. I feel quite nervous when I think of the flurry of her poor mind."

"She will be unable, of course, to canvass personally."

"I am sure so much the better; for she was sadly overtired the last election; and it is hard work, no doubt."

"Well, we wish her all success. We expect Miss

Highclere to-morrow; she arrives by the 11.20 train, but will not leave till the poll is closed."

"Miss Highclere is invaluable. I really think that the county should present her with some testimonial if this seat is carried."

"Take down this fish at once, and tell Mrs. Jones that it is perfectly raw!" shouted Sir Joseph.

The head-footman lounged up. "It is the second time that it has happened," he said.

"Tell her it must not happen again, Fox."

"All right!"

"Are you fortunate in your household, Lady Murch?" asked Lord Goodchild.

"Miss Burden, who is sitting next to you, will tell you that we are singularly happy."

"Some of the girls are very giddy," said Miss Burden, abruptly.

"It is a difficult team to drive," said his lordship.

"Team! yes; we have a capital coachman," said Lady Murch absently, for she was watching Fox, who, with a dish handed to Mrs. Reid, had remained for at least three minutes in that attitude listening to Sir Frederick's description of the day's run.

"I think young ladies are quite as difficult to manage as young maid-servants," continued Miss Burden—"they are so flighty; this very morning I had cause to complain of it."

At this moment Mr. Fox recollected himself, and moved his dish to another lady, and Lady Murch, relieved, returned to her neighbour.

"The difficulties of such a household are very

great, Lord Goodchild," she said; "and accustomed as I am to encounter difficulties, I have often felt nearly baffled."

"In what respect? I do not ask out of mere curiosity, for we are ourselves meditating fresh household arrangements."

"Well, to begin with—the difficulty of getting gentlemen-helps. Sir Joseph advertised for a coachman, a butler, and a head-footman at the same time. We had no less than a hundred and fifty-eight applications for the coachman's place, one for the butler's place, and none at all for the footman's. The butler's place was filled by a cousin of my own, who is the comfort of my life," and she looked affectionately at Colonel Clarence, who was deep in a military discussion with Lady Snowdon. "The coachman was selected with great difficulty; the footman's situation was taken by one of the applicants for the coachman's place, who knows more about horses than waiting at table."

"No, no, Sir Frederick!" cried the head-footman, suddenly. "You are quite mistaken; she's a capital mare! more going in her than in any in the stables. When Marmaduke came home from Ashton coverts dead beat, Nancy had never turned a hair."

"So you all say, I know, Fox; but I never saw an uglier tumble than she gave young Tom."

"He does not know how to ride her, and——"

"Mr. Fox, will you kindly bring me some grouse?" said Lady Murch's deep voice.

"All right! I forgot. I beg your pardon. Wing or leg?"

"Leg. To continue, Lord Goodchild: one difficulty, of course, is the increase of salaries. It would not, of course, be expected that a lady-help should come to you for the same salary that a servant would; well, of course, they have to learn their work, and during that time extra assistance is absolutely necessary. You will be astonished to hear that at this moment I have sixteen charwomen in the house and five odd men."

"Indeed! Your accounts of difficulty would make me hesitate but for one thing—the enormous increase of wages demanded by servants. They say (and rightly) that they have far more knowledge of their duties, and are worth more than the lady-helps, and do not see why they should be less well paid: it is the same with men-servants."

"This is again a difficulty: you cannot expect lady-helps to associate with any but gentlemen-helps, and these are very difficult to get, being generally an odd set—disinherited sons, dismissed from universities, or wanting in intellect, or thoroughly idle. It is very hard to manage."

"It must be, indeed."

"Cooks have been the worst of all. My cook, Mrs. Jones, insists upon being called a lady-help, and gives herself great airs, though she is but a cook after all; and she makes herself very unpleasant to the young ladies, I am afraid."

"She does indeed," murmured Miss Burden.

At this moment the door burst open, and the coachman came in flourishing a letter in his hand.

"A telegram from Firton, Lady Murch!" he cried. "Miss Highclere wants me to go there at once; things are going very badly with Mrs. Lane."

"Badly!" almost shrieked Lady Goodchild. "The baby?"

"No, no, the election. Can I go, Sir Joseph? I have told Thomas that you can have the greys if you want them to-morrow; but I don't wish to have Castor or Pollux used; you can do as you like about the mare."

"Very well; you will drive over Miss Highclere to-morrow will you, after the poll is closed?"

"Yes; I don't mind very much, as it will be dark: but I don't like being seen with her."

"Be off, then? Good night;" and once more the dinner proceeded quietly.

A bright sunny morning followed a misty night, and when Bertha and Amy awoke from most refreshing slumbers, the panes of glass in their attic were rich with frost-pictures. Bertha could not avoid little shrieks as she plunged into her cold bath, and proceeded to make her toilet with cheeks as rosy as a child's. About eight o'clock the door opened, and some one with a pinched, sour-looking face looked in.

"I am glad to see you're up, young ladies," said the owner of the face, in a voice which corresponded with her vinegar aspect. "Now if you'll excuse me, Miss Fitzherbert, your bow is not straight; tie your apron behind, not in front. You, if you please, Miss

Gordon, are to run down at once to Mrs. Jones. Now follow me, Miss Fitzherbert."

Bertha obeyed, only watching Amy a little wistfully as she tripped off downstairs.

"I suppose you know nothing about what you have undertaken?" said Miss Price, as the two together entered a long passage.

"I am afraid not very much."

"Well, this is the housemaid's closet; it has been fitted up as you see by Lady Murch to facilitate agreeable society for the lady-helps—here a sofa, there an arm-chair, behind that curtain a recess, a high chair to sit on while washing or rinsing at the sink; charwomen see to the slops, but *we* sluice ewers and basins with fresh water. Miss Murch, good morning."

Miss Murch entered the housemaid's closet in her riding-habit.

"Are you showing that poor child her duties before breakfast, Miss Price? Come, Bertha (I may call you Bertha, may I not?), you had better come to breakfast first. I am going to breakfast with you, Miss Price, for Gwen and I are going to have a gallop before the 'company' make their appearance, when I shall elegantly nibble toast, decline ham, and sip tea, and be pitied by Mrs. Reid for my delicacy of constitution. Come along."

"Does your mamma approve of these unladylike doings, Miss Murch? If so——"

"Never mind, come along, it is cold enough to make the very idea of breakfast delicious!" and she led the way downstairs.

The lady-helps' parlour was bright with a blazing fire, on which a kettle sang rapturously; the toast and bread and butter looked most inviting; the coffee smelt so fragrantly that Mrs. Jones herself could not mar its sweetness, though with dirty poppies in her black cap she looked more vulgar than usual. Gwendoline was half-way through her breakfast, looking radiantly pretty in a dark-green riding-habit; only poor little Amy looked sad and spiritless.

"Miss Murch, I must beg," began Mrs. Jones, "that you will not repeat of taking out my kitchen-'elps in this way; it leaves all the hard work to them as is too good for it."

"All right, Jones; give me some ham. Make haste, Gwen; I have not told you that we are to have a cavalier to-day."

"Cavalier! the new footman! and a saucy one he is—not so much the gentleman as we're accustomed to."

"Jones, give Miss Gwendoline the butter at once."

"Here, Gwendoline."

"I said *Miss* Gwendoline."

Mrs. Jones made no answer, but poured out some tea with a jerk.

"We must make haste with the rooms to-day, Eliza," said Miss Agatha Burden to her sister.

"There's no greater hurry than usual."

"Miss Price tells me Miss Highclere is to have the red room; and what with her litter, and smoking, and writing, we shall have our hands full."

"And the red room dressing-room is to have the

bed out and writing things put in," said Miss Price; "and the walnut room is to be prepared for Mr. Leslie. We shall have the house quite full to-day."

Bertha started violently, but went on with her tea, hoping that no one noticed her rosy cheeks.

"I hear Mr. Leslie comes by the nine o'clock train," said Miss Eliza. "So thoughtless. I shall scarcely have time to get my breakfast down; for I don't suppose you will be much help," she said, ungraciously, to Bertha.

"I will do my best," she said, sweetly.

"Now, Gwen, if you have done."

"Quite done, thanks. Mind, Mrs. Jones, not too much fuss about the pastry at first. Miss Gordon is under my special protection."

And shaking her finger at her chief, Gwendoline followed her young mistress.

"You have not seen the new footman yet, have you?" asked Mary Murch, as they went out into the stable-yard.

"No, not yet. If he is no more amusing than his predecessor, I do not expect much from his acquaintance."

"He is to meet us at the lodge, as he is exercising Marmaduke, and is obliged to let off steam a little before riding with the ladies."

"Captain Lawrence must have much confidence in him to let him exercise Marmaduke; why, Mr. Fox himself is never allowed to ride him."

"Oh, he knows what he is about; they are old

friends. You know that Captain Lawrence is gone to Firton, so Thomas must mount us."

Another moment and the two girls were cantering off to the lodge.

"How delicious it is in the early morning!" cried Gwendoline, as, putting their horses on to the grass, they turned across the park. The hoar-frost sparkled like diamonds on every blade, a clear blue mist was between them and the trees, at a little distance the water of the lake looked blue as the depth of the sky, and two white swans swam haughtily to and fro, aware that their plumage actually dazzled the eye in the early gleams of the sun.

"Alas, that so soon all this sweetness and freshness should be exchanged for the hot kitchen of Mrs. Jones!"

"Don't think of it now; think of nothing but what is bright and joyous. There is the new footman."

"Where?"

Gwendoline shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed in the direction pointed out; she started suddenly.

"Mary, you have deceived me. I will not go."

"What do you mean? Do not turn back; he has not seen us."

"Let me go. I will not stay."

"What do you mean?"

"I will not go. Do you know who that gentleman is, or not?"

"Of course I do; it is Mr. Herbert, the new footman."

"It is Mr. Herbert Montgomery, a very different person; how dare he follow me here?"

"Oh, Gwen, what fun! Is he a suitor of yours?"

"Yes, how dare he?"

"You do not look as if you minded it much," said Mary, archly.

"But I refused him; he has no right to come bothering me like this. Leave my reins; I must go: see, he sees us."

"Then we must join him. Nonsense, Gwen; it is far more dignified."

"I will never forgive you," murmured Gwendoline, as the cavalier rode up.

CHAPTER IV.

"GOOD morning, Miss Murch. Ah!"

"Do not counterfeit surprise, Mr. Montgomery; it is not worth while."

"I vow——"

"Nor vow false vows. I am sorry to see you in such different circumstances. Mary, is it not nearly time to go in?"

"I cannot go in yet. This brute has been eating his head off in idleness, and wants a good gallop."

As he spoke, whether by accident or design, Marmaduke reared violently.

"Take care, for heaven's sake! I hope he is not dangerous."

"Oh, no, Miss Murch; see, your friend has stronger nerves," he said, rather bitterly.

"I have seen you worse mounted."

"Ah, you mean Robin Hood!" he cried, eagerly. "Do you remember that day?"

"It must be time to go in, Mary," said Gwendoline, impatiently.

The new footman turned his back on the two girls, and rode off rather sulkily. Marmaduke quite quiet and subdued.

"He is going," said Gwendoline, in a low, anxious voice.

"Then call him back."

"I can't—I won't; but I wanted, really out of curiosity, to hear what has made him come down to this, for his sister's sake. Is he not a bear? He is always like that."

"Mr. Herbert!"

"Miss Murch."

"Miss Gwendoline wants to ask you a question."

"She must come and ask me in the pantry."

"You do not mean it?"

Gwendoline had touched her horse with the whip, and was speeding home—she would not stand that. In the pantry, indeed! She was quivering with indignation. Mary Murch was quite out of breath when she overtook her at the door.

In ten minutes Miss Murch, beautifully dressed, was sitting between Sir Frederick Snowdon and Mrs. Reid at the ten o'clock breakfast; and Gwendoline, with her eyes still flashing, her cheeks flushed, and lips curling involuntarily into smiles, was hard at work with the vegetables for luncheon.

"I hate slops," said Miss Burden, querulously.

"Well, call the charwoman."

"I have called her twice, but she is with Miss Price."

"Make Miss Fitzherbert empty them."

"How cross of you! when you know she has as

much as she can manage with that Miss Price always after her."

"Well, *please*, don't grumble."

"I am not grumbling; I only said I hated slops." And she walked off with the pail.

"Smoother, please, Miss Herbert, that crease will never do; now, tuck it in nicely. See, there is another crease! Stop a moment, child; that apron of yours will twist round. Now run to the sink and wash out the glasses, and then fill the water-bottles; mind you wipe them well with a clean duster. The dusters are kept in the right-hand middle drawer of——. Oh, dear, how dusty that is! Give me the duster; never flick at a thing like that."

Bertha ran away to the housemaids' closet; she found Miss Burden wiping out a ewer and basin, and talking to Lady Goodchild, who sat with Mrs. Reid on the sofa. "Good morning," said the former, graciously, as Bertha made her pretty little bow. Mrs. Reid stared at her superciliously. Bertha set to her work at once.

"Miss Fitzherbert, come here."

"Yes."

"When you have done, follow me to the red room with the brooms."

"Is that the new housemaid, Miss Burden?" asked Mrs. Reid.

"Yes; and a nice, active girl she seems, though she knows nothing about her. work; she has never been out before."

"Miss Price is rather severe, is she not?"

"*I* have nothing to do with Miss Price."

"Indeed! I thought you were second in the housemaid's department."

"We have no heads here, save nominal ones, Mrs. Reid; we choose our own work, and do it at our own time; we could inot undertake these offices unless it were so."

"Ahem!" said Lady Goodchild.

"Do you mean anything by that?" said Miss Burden, trembling nervously.

"Nothing at all; I am only making observations with a view to starting some such establishment myself," said Lady Goodchild. "Miss Murch, is that you?'

"Good morning, Miss Burden. Lady Goodchild, mamma is going to drive in the pony-carriage, and wants to know whether you prefer going out in the morning or in the afternoon."

"I will go with her now, if she wishes it."

"Very well. Will you meet her in the kitchen in about a quarter of an hour? Mr. Stuart and Sir Frederick are there now; they are going with you."

"I will go and dress."

"What will you do, Mrs. Reid?"

"I shall not go out this morning; I will take my work and sit wherever you do."

"Lady Snowdon is in the drawing-room."

"She is a dull old woman; I don't care to sit with her."

"And after mamma is dressed, Mrs. Lurgan has promised to sing—she sings divinely."

"Why can't I come with you?"

"Oh, by all means! only you know I am such a flibberty-gibbet."

"And where do you come from now, flibberty-gibbet?"

"Oh, from downstairs."

"What part of downstairs?"

"The regions of the Troglodites."

"Which cave?"

"I was with Colonel Clarence."

"Oh, in the pantry?"

"Well, yes—I was."

"Let me come with you."

"Very well."

"Ah non giunge
Uman pensiero!
Al' contento
Ond' io son piena!"

sang the kitchenmaid at her work in the kitchen; she danced along with a pie-dish in her hands, in the usual white apron and bib. Another voice took up the strain, from the pantry—a rich tenor voice—

"A miei sensi
Io credo appena
Tu m'af-fi-da!
O mio Tesor!"

The kitchen-door shut with a decided bang, and Gwendoline rushed to the fire.

"Stop, stop!" shouted Mrs. Jones. "Don't turn it, you awkward girl; baste it, or it will burn!"

A burst of laughter—Gwendoline turned round her rosy, defiant face.

"Mary, *do* go upstairs. How can we do our work with all of you here? Here Sir Frederick has been insisting upon stoning the plums, and has eaten quite half."

"I protest——"

"Useless protestations!" cried Mrs. Reid, with would-be archness. "Please, Miss Gwendoline, if you have any materials, I should so like to make an omelet; I have not made one for years."

Mrs. Jones went on doggedly with her work.

"Instead of that, would you whip these eggs for me? There—it is most artistic with a sharp flip and whisk."

"Oh, what fun! Can you lend me an apron?"

"Here—but please don't dirty it; it must last me till Saturday."

"Mayn't I shell peas?"

"No, Sir Frederick, not in November; but if you would copy out this receipt for me, I should be very much obliged."

"I see neither pen, ink, nor paper."

"They are all in the pantry."

"Here is Lady Murch!" cried Gwendoline.

"Good morning, my dear. Has Lady Goodchild come down yet?"

"No, not yet; but she went to dress ten minutes ago."

"If she comes in, Gwendoline, ask her to be so kind as to wait a few moments for me, for I must speak to poor young Herbert for a few moments."

"Is anything the matter, mamma?" asked Mary, demurely.

"No, nothing the matter; but one likes to be kind to any one so unfortunate; it is a sad case of broken fortunes without any culpability on the part of the victim—one of those cases one often reads of, but seldom meets—a most exemplary young man."

"Who told you about him, mamma?"

"Captain Lawrence, an old schoolfellow of his. Don't forget my message, girls. Gwendoline, remember you must have a walk to-day; you look flushed."

At this moment Amy came timidly into the kitchen.

"Good morning," said Lady Murch; "I hope you are getting on well, my dear."

"Oh, may I show you my tartlets, Lady Murch? I should so like to do so."

"Do; I should like to see them very much."

Amy eagerly led the way into the stillroom.

"Look," she said, gleefully. "Lady Murch had a good eye for design. "What a pretty design!" she exclaimed; "I must have it for my flower-beds. Where did you get it?"

"From Villemin. It is a very good one, is it not? Only I should have liked two or three coloured jams; but Mrs. Jones would not let me—she said it was extravagant."

"Well, leave them as they are, and I will send Mr. Fox to sketch off the design quickly, as I daresay you have not time."

"Oh, thank you. I have a good deal to do: there is the paste for the dumplings to be made."

Lady Murch swept out, and Amy went on with her work.

"Miss Gordon!" shouted Mrs. Jones—that lady's voice was never less than a shout.

"Those tartlets must be baked, or they'll never be ready for luncheon."

"I am so sorry, but Lady Murch is going to send in Mr. Fox to sketch them, so they must wait."

"But I tell you they must be done at once."

"I will run and ask Mr. Fox to be quick." Amy sped away to the pantry.

"Oh, please, Mr. Fox," she said, "would you mind sketching the design before it is baked?"

"Oh, ah! I forgot; Lady Murch said something about it. Ring the bell, Herbert. Thanks. When the odd fellow comes tell him to finish cleaning those lamps, etc. I ain't coming back."

"By Jove, that is pretty!" he said, on beholding the result of Amy's labours; it inspires me." He drew out of a drawer all manner of drawing materials, and began making designs.

Amy came to Miss Murch with a very troubled face.

"Please, I beg your pardon; but Mr. Fox was going to draw my tartlets, and instead he is making all kinds of designs, and I do so want to begin to bake them."

"What do you want me to do, my dear?"

"Please get him to leave off, and sketch them quickly; he will attend to you."

"Have you found that out already?" and Mary laughed to herself as she disappeared into the still-room.

"Are those eggs ready, Mrs. Reid?" asked Gwendoline, with her white little hands kneading away in a basin.

"What eggs?"

"The white you were whisking. I can't wait a moment. Oh, please whisk it quicker, or my pudding will be spoilt. Oh, quick, quick! What have you been doing?"

"I got absorbed in the cookery-book, and forgot it. Shall I be in time?"

"Go on, go on!"

"But my hand aches so!"

"Only a minute more! there, pour it in—that's right. Now the saucepan—all together."

"Evviva! It is on the fire! 'Saved! saved! saved!' as Tennyson hath it."

"Only just in time," said Mrs. Reid, panting. "I don't know when I have been so flurried."

CHAPTER V.

"WHAT a bustling day it has been!" said Bertha, as she helped to fasten Amy Gordon's white muslin dress. She was invited with Miss Price to dinner.

"I wonder if every day will be like it," said Amy. "I fancy so, from what one hears and sees. How delightful it would be, but for Mrs. Jones!"

"I don't know," sighed Bertha; "I think I should be happier if all were more regular, as I expected to find it; besides, I dread being asked to dinner."

"Why, dear? are you shy?"

"Yes; and besides——"

"Tell me; you seem low-spirited to-night." To Amy's surprise, Bertha suddenly turned away, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Bertha! dear Bertha! please tell me what is it? Can I help you? can I comfort you?"

"It is nothing; do not ask me."

"But I do so want to know; does it dishearten you? are you unhappy about it all? Do tell me, dear."

And Amy knelt down beside her friend, and put her arms round her tenderly.

"You are very kind to me, Amy; I feel as if I had known you all my life."

"Try to imagine that you have, and let me make you happier."

"I will tell you, only keep my secret. You know that Mr. Leslie who arrived to-day?"

"I have seen him—yes."

"We were engaged."

"*Were* engaged? and not now?"

"I hardly like to tell you; do not think badly of him, but he has never written or come to see me since we became poor."

"I think badly of him! I think he is a villain!"

Bertha pushed her friend away from her.

"You know nothing of him," she said, with flashing eyes. Amy changed as quickly.

"It may have been accidental," she said. Bertha shook her head, and two large tears streamed down her cheeks again.

"You think not?"

"I think it was his relations; they were very anxious he should marry some one with money. I do not know why, for he is very well off; there was some heiress they were always teasing him about."

"Could it be Miss Murch?"

"Don't say so!" cried Bertha, passionately; "don't, please! the same idea has struck me also. Now, dear Amy, help me; warn me if you can, always, so that I may avoid his seeing me."

"Would it not be better for you, dear, to see him and get it over? Think of the constant watching; it will wear you out."

"Oh no, no!"

"There is the gong! Shall I send an excuse? shall I stay? I cannot bear leaving you like this."

"No, go; thank you, dear Amy: you promise, then, to help me?"

"I will indeed."

"Perhaps you are not aware, Miss Gordon, that the bell has rung," said a prim voice; and Miss Price, in a long-waisted black silk gown, adorned with a huge mosaic brooch, entered the room.

"I am quite ready; how good of you to come for me!" and the two went downstairs. The moon had risen, and was looking through the attic windows. Bertha could see what a lovely night it was; she had been at work all day, and felt a longing for a few moments out of doors to cool her hot eyes and crimson cheeks. She put on a hat and cloak and stole downstairs. At the head of the great staircase she paused, and, looking through, saw the long line of couples going into the dining-room. Sir Joseph headed the procession, making some loud observation about the weather; two and two they passed on: now a voice struck on her ear, which made her grasp the banister tightly—a voice she knew well, speaking in low, clear tones; she could not hear what he said, she could not see his face, but she saw that the lady on his arm was dressed in pale pink silk, that she had cherries in her hair, and gold bangles on her arms; in another moment she would be out of sight—no! she drops her fan, stoops to pick it up, turns her face, the dining-room lights fall upon it—it is fair, and bright,

and rosy, but with such pouting lips and discontented mien!—it was Mary Murch.

"She is *not* a nice girl," said Bertha to herself; "one would think she had a bad temper." Bertha's aching little heart was as nearly being spiteful as its gentle nature would allow it to be.

The broad terrace in front of the house lay in one sheet of silver moonlight, the water in the fountains plashed lazily, there was not a breath of air. Bertha wandered across the terrace to the shrubberies, enjoying the keen, still cold; her thoughts were in a tumult, and her body weary with the unwonted exertion of the day; she would not let herself cry again, but she felt very sad.

"Who is it?" said a figure suddenly emerging from the bushes.

"It is I;—how you startled me, Miss Gwendoline."

"Do not call me Miss."

"Very well. Are you out alone?"

"Yes, trying to get a breath of air after the hot kitchen and the hotter Mrs. Jones."

"I am afraid she is very trying, from what Amy says; but you have such high spirits to pull you through."

"High spirits flag sometimes! mine are at a low ebb to-night."

"So are mine."

"I thought so by the sound of your voice. Come and walk with me; this is such a nice quiet shrubbery, so close to the house that we are quite safe. What a lovely night!"

"Yes; is it not?"

"It is a pity that we have not each a cavalier with velvet doublet and flowing hair to walk with us, it would be so romantic. Did you ever think about having a lover all to yourself?"

"No."

"Your 'No' is so conscious, it means Yes. I hate talking about these things, but I can't help it to-night. It must be very nice to be loved."

"It must indeed."

"But I should like not to care about him at all."

"Oh, would you?"

"Yes; have him my slave and lover, and not to care about him in the least—it is so irritating."

"What is?"

"Nothing; only when people won't see things, and are blind as bats and obstinate as mules, and believe all one says."

"I like to be believed."

"So do I—of course I do. What nonsense we are talking!"

Bertha gave a little laugh.

"I think I would rather have a certain amount of affection for my cavalier."

"If you had, he would not care for you."

"The tears rushed to Bertha's eyes.

"Do you think so?" she said.

"I do think, seriously, that the world would be much happier and calmer without strong emotions of any sort."

"Oh, so do I."

"And much more intolerable," added Gwendoline, pinching off a bunch of whin-pods, and cracking them with a loud sounding pop.

"Do you like service, Gwendoline?"

"Pretty well; it 'does as well as anything else; but I am not sure about the rights of it."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean this: every class has its own particular rights and privileges—its own field for ambition; we are usurping the legitimate rights of the lower classes."

"I don't understand."

"This is all theory, my dear, so take it for what it is worth; but listen to what I think about it. We born ladies are born with advantages of breeding, and almost always of education, which give us an opportunity of exercising any talent we may possess. We may become artists, or musicians, or highly-paid governesses, with a prospect of a school for young ladies some day; or we may attract individuals to marry us. The Royal Academy, St. James's Hall, The Ladies' Seminary in St. John's Wood, or the School of Art—under Royal patronage,—all these are the legitimate aims of poor ladies. Perhaps they are few who attain them; but then, after all, there must be a great deal of pudding to comparatively few plums."

"You are not very clear."

"Am I not? I wish I could be. But what I feel is this,—that domestic service is the property of the lower orders; they, in it, can begin at the lowest step; the dirtiest little housemaid may hope one day to be treading the room in black silks and a

gold chain; the pantry boy to be waiting in broadcloth and a white tie. It is the advantage given to them, the education bestowed on them, and they have as much right to their field of ambition as we have to ours. It distresses me to hear the complaints on every side from all the mothers in the cottages that their daughters cannot get places."

"But ought we to go on as we are?"

"Not for ever, Bertha—not for ever."

"It does not do to build on the future, to make *chateaux en Espagne*," said Bertha.

"Why not?"

"Surely it is a dangerous habit."

"I cannot see that. On the contrary, it seems to me one of the privileges of human beings over brute beasts to dream dreams and build castles. Oh! what would life be without it?"

"I claim exemption for dogs from the accusation of not being able to enjoy *chateaux en Espagne*. Have you not seen dogs dreaming over an imaginary chase?"

"Past, not future."

"That is conjecture only. I have seen them also get up, waggle coaxingly across the room, lick their lips, and sit down again; and at such moments, seen dinner actually written in their honest eyes,—and such a dinner! so excellent that it could exist only on the table of a *chateau en Espagne*."

After that retract your condemnation, and agree with me that it is lawful to enjoy the gift of imagination to the full."

"Granted, if you are a busy person; if you are an idle one, certainly not."

"I accept the compromise, for it is a wise one. I almost think we ought to be going in, Bertha, now, or we may catch cold."

"Yes, we had better go in; but I am sorry to do so. Look at those black clouds with their edges broken into masses of silver foam."

The two girls walked slowly homewards, their shadows stretching on the terrace to an enormous length.

CHAPTER VI.

A CARRIAGE came crashing through the gravel to Murch Hall just as the great hall-clock struck twelve o'clock. The door was flung open, and a flood of hospitable light poured into the portico, and a crowd of eager faces filled the hall.

"What news! what news!" they cried.

"Let me out," said a deep voice; and from the midst of bundles of shawls and rugs emerged the tall form of Miss Highclere.

"Please tell me the result," cried Lady Goodchild; but Miss Highclere only waved her back and stalked through the whole party to the drawing-room. There was no thought of greetings or welcomes, only who could follow her quickest.

Arrived in the drawing-room, Miss Highclere planted herself with her back to the fire, with a very grim look on the grey face which showed under something which was neither a bonnet nor a helmet.

"Well," she said, slowly, "we have lost the seat."

"Lost the seat!"

"Yes, lost the seat."

There was a profound silence; then Lady Goodchild said, *les larmes dans la voix*, "But what has my poor daughter done?"

"It was that scene in the House that did it," said Miss Highclere, wrathfully. "I always knew the constituents would never forget it. I always said so."

"You never said so before."

"Yes, I did."

"Then if you had acted the part of a true friend, you would have advised my daughter not to stand again."

"I did, but she would not listen."

"Well," said Lady Murch, "it is no use reproaching each other now. Be so good, Miss Highclere, as to tell us the reason of Mrs. Lane's defeat."

"I repeat: it was the result of that unfortunate scene in the House."

"What scene?" said Sir Frederick.

"She had been asking the House night after night for an opportunity of bringing in her Compulsory Adult Education to a Certain Standard of the Females of the Upper Classes Bill. She had spent months of her time upon framing the bill, and had thrown all her energies and hopes into it. The day was given at last; she made her speech admirably, and the bill was negatived without a division."

"It was a cruel shame," murmured Lady Goodchild.

"The chances of war," said her husband, testily.

"Then occurred the scene which has led to her defeat," said Miss Highclere, solemnly.

"But what did she do?"

"She flew at the member of the Opposition who sat opposite to her, exclaiming, 'I saw you laughing

at me!' she tore off her bonnet and threw it on the ground, and then went off into a frightful fit of hysterics."

"She was worn out and over-excited from extreme fatigue," said Lady Goodchild. "She had not been in bed before three o'clock for a week past, and had to take a large glass of sal volatile before she went down to the House that night, poor child."

"Then," said Miss Highclere, proudly, "we had an opportunity of seeing the superiority of the nerves of the female members to those of the male. I was in the lobby when she was carried out perfectly rigid and shrieking fearfully, and I saw one gentleman after another come out and drink a glass of brandy-and-water; half of them did so at least, and all looking quite pale: none of the female members cared in the least."

"Well, it is a great disappointment," said Lady Murch, lighting a bedroom candle; "but it is very late, and you look very tired, Miss Highclere."

"I look tired. I! I am impervious to fatigue; but I have no objection to retire, for I have at least a dozen letters to write to-night."

And the party dispersed for the night.

Guests came and went with such constant change and rapidity at Murch Hall that the lady-helps scarcely had a moment to themselves; only Miss Highclere, George Leslie, and the Reids outstayed them all.

One day an unusual number arrived, and Lady Murch determined to amuse them all by dancing in

the evening, and she invited all the household, with the exception of Mrs. Jones and the French lady's-maid, to get their work over and join in the evening's amusement.

Gwendoline, whose spirits had risen again to overflowing pitch, went singing about her work in her high sweet voice—

"'Will you walk a little faster?' said a whiting to a snail,
'There's a porpoise close behind me, and he's treading on my tail:
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance;
They are waiting on the shingle—won't you come and join the dance?'"

A sudden and unexpected chorus burst from pantry, still-room, and passage—

"Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?"

Entering into the fun of it, Mary Murch, Mrs. Reid, and Sir Joseph came into the room. Amy in the still-room went on singing—

"You can really have no notion how delightful it will be,
When they take us up and throw us with the lobsters out to sea."

To everybody's surprise, Sir Joseph suddenly broke out in a loud gruff voice—

"But the snail replied, 'Too far, too far,' and gave a look askance,
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he would not 'join the dance.'"

It was irresistible; the doors flew open; Amy ran in with her hands covered with flour, Mr. Fox and

Mr. Herbert coatless, the latter busily cleaning a teapot; merry little Susie Gray from the scullery, all joined together.

"Would not, could not, would not, could not, could not join the dance."

Mrs. Jones fairly wrung her hands.

"There's veal, Sir Joseph," she said, piteously—"there's roast veal, and you know what a delicate thing that is, and me not knowing which way to turn with the noise. Miss Gwendoline, do try and do them potato-chips; and, Miss Amy, that there tart will be a black, burning cinder."

"I'm off, I'm off," said Sir Joseph; "and we mustn't do it again. Fox, I came down to speak to the Colonel."

"He's in the pantry, Sir Joseph."

"I want his advice about the young plantations," and he went off to find him.

"You want butter, don't you?" said Mrs. Jones.

"Yes, there on that plate; thanks."

"Bless and save us, not so much! You're off your head to-day, Miss Gwendoline."

"It only wants a very little bit," said Herbert, demurely.

"You be off to your lamps, sir, if you please."

"I have done my work, and am come to help in the kitchen."

"We want no help in the kitchen, sir."

"I took the situation on the understanding that I might help in the kitchen."

"Well, take and rub down them dressers; but who's a-doin' of your work?"

"Macdown. I've done everything for him for the last week, as he wanted to finish his article for the 'Quarterly,' and now he is taking my duty. One good turn deserves another." And he began to scrub lustily.

"I suppose you have not yet told Gwendoline the sad and painful history of your reduced circumstances?" said Mary, in a low voice.

"No; she won't speak or take any notice of me, so I won't speak to her till she comes and asks me in the pantry."

"Nonsense."

"I won't."

"You are very blind."

He would have said something eagerly, but she went away.

"By-the-bye, Mr. Fox," said Gwendoline, suddenly, "I have mended your green-baize apron; it is in that top drawer; it was rather a troublesome job."

"Oh, thank you."

"Mine is very much torn, too," said Mr. Herbert. "it wants mending sadly."

"If you will put it here when you go upstairs, I will tell Jones to see that Susie mends it. Mr. Fox, I see you are idle; did you ever pluck a duck? The charwomen always do it, but they have so much to do to-day, that it will be very kind of you to undertake it."

"With all my heart, if Miss Murch will give me

something to put the beast's feathers in. How shall I steady it?"

"Oh, put the poker across its feet to hold it down."

And Mary handed him the poker.

"Did you ever see such a melancholy fellow as that George Leslie?" said Mr. Fox, pulling away anxiously at the duck.

"He looks as if he had one foot in the grave," said Mr. Herbert.

"I say, you fellow!" shouted a voice, "can't you come and help? It is half-past one, and I am miles away from the end of all there is to be done."

"One good turn deserves another," answered Herbert.

"But Fox might come. I say, Fox, do come; the governor has carried off the Colonel, and I have his work as well as my own."

No answer.

"Fox, I say!"

"Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!"

"Come and help."

"I can't come, I'm plucking a beast of a bird, and the more feathers I take off, the more it puts on."

"Stuff!"

"No, it can't be stuffed till it's plucked all over."

"Then you, Herbert."

"I'm scrubbing."

"The deuce you are! well, somebody must help me;" and the very fat form of the valet, Mr. Macdown, appeared at the door with tucked-up sleeves and a leather apron.

"Miss Murch, you are doing nothing; could you not scrub the tables and send me Herbert?"

"Needs must where a woman drives," said Herbert, throwing down his brushes, and lounging away after the valet.

"I am going to see what Amy is doing," said Mrs. Reid. She found the little pastry-maid hard at work, surrounded by exquisite little game-pies, open tarts, round tarts, square tarts.

"I am in my element," she cried, gaily; "look at my shapes and designs—cruel that any one should eat them! Those two are from Villemin; these others from the 'Recueil des Faiences Italiennes;' that one is Pugin; and that lovely rabbit-pie is from a scrap in Street's 'Architecture of Spain.' I consider that moulding a *chef-d'œuvre!*"

"It is indeed; but how do you get hold of all these things?"

"Oh, I know them well; I am so fond of designs. Do you notice that pie? The colouring of it gave me a great deal of trouble: a touch of brown to give the mellow effect of age, a dash of yellow lichen with the tiniest scrap of egg, and a wealth of weeds at the top, represented by this parsley."

"It is most artistic. I hope the interior—the animal element—is as successful as the mental one."

Amy looked anxious. "Don't make me nervous," she said. "I know that sometimes, when I have spent too much care and thought on the architecture, I have failed within: but Hannah made the rabbit

part; so even if my walls be uneatable, the contents are sure to be admirable."

"What a number of them to-day!"

"They are for supper after the dance," said Amy, gleefully—"oh, how I love dancing!"

"Is Bertha coming this evening?"

"I don't know; I am afraid I shall not be able to persuade her to come—she *will* shut herself up."

"Is she not well?"

"Yes, she is well, but she is so dreadfully shy; it would do her all the good in the world if she could be persuaded to come."

"We would set her and George Leslie to dance together."

"Why?" Amy started.

"Because, both being so forlorn, they would suit each other."

"Well, I wish she would dance with any one."

"She never walks or drives with all of us: does she never go out at all?"

"Yes, early in the morning, any time when she can be sure of being alone."

"I suspect that she is a proud, unsociable girl."

"Oh, no; she is such a darling; but she is very shy and unreasonable."

Meanwhile the object of their conversation was at work, dusting Lady Murch's bedroom; it was a pretty room, full of old china and valuable knick-knacks; and Miss Price never allowed any one to dust it excepting herself and Bertha, of whom she had conceived a very high opinion.

Bertha was standing before the fireplace, replacing a beautiful Dresden vase, when Lady Murch came in.

"I hoped I should find you here, my dear," she said, "for I wanted to speak to you."

Bertha stood before her, twisting her little feather-broom; one curl of her pretty brown hair had escaped, and hung on her shoulder in a fashion to which it had once been accustomed.

"My dear," said Lady Murch, seating herself, "I wanted to tell you that I wish you to come to the dance to-night—now, do not begin at once to refuse. You shall stay by me or by Mrs. Lurgan if you are shy, and there are only about twenty people coming who are not in the house, and I really wish you to appear."

"I cannot—indeed I cannot."

"You will do so to please me, I am sure. I have been distressed to notice how you shrink away by yourself instead of mingling with the family in the right and proper way; and I cannot allow it to continue."

"Indeed! indeed!"

"I have ordered a little white muslin gown for you, just like Amy's," went on Lady Murch, severely; "so I hope for no excuse."

Bertha burst into tears.

"Now, my dear, excuse me; but this is really silly."

"Oh, please forgive me—you are so kind; but indeed, indeed if you make me come downstairs, I must——"

"Must what?"

"I must leave you."

"We will talk of that another time," said Lady Murch, rising much displeased; and she added as she left the room, "Remember I shall expect to see you to-night. Hysterical nonsense," she said to herself, as she went downstairs. "Unworthy of my household." Two voices caught her ear and made her smile as she passed—

"I will wear my pink, Agatha."

"You look a perfect guy in pink at your age; why can't you dress as best becomes you?"

"I am the best judge of that."

"You are not."

"I am."

"I tell you, you are not."

"And I tell you I won't be put upon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER VII.

"RING, ring, ring! Do you hear that bell, Mrs. Lurgan?"

"Yes, Miss Price, that is Sir Joseph's bell."

"Again! that is the fourth time. What can the men be about, and what can Sir Joseph want at this hour?"

"I know what he wants, Miss Price—he wants to dress; they put off dressing until after dinner, all except my lady herself, who called Sir Joseph a goose—an old goose, she said—because he was too much absorbed in a game of chess with Mr. Fox to—— There it is again!"

"Really, one of us must go; I suppose the gentlemen are dressing. Could you go, Mrs. Lurgan?"

"How can I, all unhooked? couldn't you go?"

"Not with hair down: let me see—perhaps one of the girls may be ready. There it is again! Bertha, Bertha!"

"Do you hear the governor's bell ringing, Macdown?" said Fox, putting a face covered with soap, and a hand holding a razor, into his friend's door.

"Of course I do; but what's a fellow to do?" and he exhibited a face in a similar condition. "Herbert's

gone down ever so long ago; happily he's quicker than we are. There it is again, drat it! as Mrs. Jones would say."

Bertha answered Miss Price's call, looking very pretty, dressed in clouds of spotless muslin; her eyes looked all the softer for the tears she found so much difficulty in suppressing.

"I have been hurrying, Miss Price—I will run at once; the Miss Burdens have been ready half an hour, but they did not consider it proper to go."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miss Price, "I would have gone myself but for my hair. There it is again!" and Bertha sped away.

She knocked at Sir Joseph's door.

"Come in," said a wrathful voice, and she ventured timidly in.

"There is nothing put out," he began; then suddenly, "I beg your pardon."

"I am so sorry," said Bertha; "but I suppose the gentlemen are dressing, and——"

"But they might have given me hot water at least, and put out some of my things. I have no socks—I have no white tie—I have no waistcoat—I have no ——" he stopped abruptly.

"Here are your ties," said Bertha, briskly, "and I will fetch hot water in half a minute. Here are a pair of black silk socks—gloves. Your coat is not brushed; I will run down and get Mr. Herbert to do it. Give me the can, and I will get the water first."

"Indeed, I cannot let you do it. Show me where to get it."

"No, no; I won't be a moment," and she sped away.

"You are an angel in my distress," said Sir Joseph, as she returned with the steaming can. "Now please don't disturb yourself about my coat, I am sure it will do."

"Oh no, I can get it done directly;" and taking the coat, Bertha ran downstairs. She knew that Herbert would probably be in the drawing-room, superintending the chalking of the floors; so she ran thither, passing through the ante-rooms. The drawing-room floor was evidently just finished, for Herbert, as she supposed, was standing by the fire-place with his back to her. She ran up to him with the coat on her arm.

"Oh, Mr. Herbert!" she began, but stopped suddenly, for she found herself face to face with George Leslie.

"There's the bell again, by George!" said Fox, again putting his head into Mr. Macdown's room.

"It is only half an hour since he rang before. Again! This is too bad. Shall I answer it, or you?"

"Oh, you; I can't get this tie right," and he tore it off and began another. Mr. Fox strolled off as another furious ring pealed through the house.

Sir Joseph had passed from towering passion to despair. "Just look at me," he said; "Lady Murch gone down a quarter of an hour, and I without a coat to my back!"

"Where is your coat, Sir Joseph?"

"The pretty little new housemaid has taken it away."

"What for?"

"To brush. She went half an hour ago, and has never come back; and if it had not been for her, I should have had no hot water or——"

"I brought you hot water myself."

"There was none here."

"But I brought it, I vow!"

"And I vow there was none here."

"Somebody must have bagged it."

"Well, never mind! only do, like a good fellow, go after my coat. Ah! here is the colonel; now I shall get all I want; and with my coat too; where did you find it?"

"I found it on the hearth-rug in the drawing-room," said Colonel Clarence, "and cannot conceive how it got there."

"It is too bad," growled Sir Joseph.

Face to face with George Leslie, Bertha felt all her strength fail her, and she would have turned and fled. What could she do? He was on his knees kissing her hand, pouring out incoherent words. "Bertha! Bertha! have I found you at last?"

Then she began to cry, and he led her away to the furthest window, where, shaded by the curtains, they could talk quietly, and out came the whole story,—how George had been seized with typhus fever two days before the ruin came, and was too ill to know anything about it—how his father, more avaricious than honourable, had seen a way of breaking off the engagement, and kept his illness a secret, leaving the Fitzherbert family to believe that the young man was

faithless. When he was well again, and had been told the news, he had quarrelled with his father, and gone at once to Mr. Fitzherbert. Bertha's father, however, deeply offended, refused to allow him to reopen communication with his daughter, vowing that she should never be received on sufferance by any man's relations; and, as he refused to give him her address, poor George left him in despair and again fell ill. Before he had quite recovered from his second attack, his father died suddenly of apoplexy; and his mother, who had always sympathised with him, again made overtures to Bertha's father, who, however, continued inexorable.

"And now I have found you! found you at last, my beautiful Bertha!" There were such an endless amount of questions and answers to make, so much to say and talk about, that the time seemed to fly. Presently Colonel Clarence came in, but he did not perceive them in the shadow of the window-curtains; he picked up Sir Joseph's coat with an air of great astonishment, and went out.

"I must go now—indeed, I must, George; they will be coming to finish lighting the candles, and I must—indeed I must arrange my hair again."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE party all assembled about ten o'clock, and as the dancing was not to begin till half-past, Lady Murch proposed having some music in the large drawing-room, emptied of carpet and furniture. It was a luxury to sing in the room, and Mrs. Lurgan's fine contralto voice seemed of twice its natural power. Gwendoline also sang some gay French songs, and the Miss Burdens, after much pressing, performed an Italian duet; then Mr. Herbert was entreated to sing. *Il se fit prier* for some minutes; then, throwing aside hesitation, boldly turned to Gwendoline and begged her to accompany him. Gwendoline agreed, and they went to the piano; there was a sound as of first guests arriving, and she hesitated, turning over the music.

"Is there time?" she said.

"Oh, yes, lots. I should like to sing, now that I am actually before the scenes; here is the song I mean to sing."

Gwendoline glanced at it, and flushing scarlet, sat down and began a brilliant prelude.

Herbert's voice was a good well-taught tenor, and he sang with much spirit.

" I' sooth, my lady, your yoke is hard,
More hard than I care to bear,
In spite, fair lady, of flashing eyes
And tresses of golden hair.

I love my lady, she knows full well,
But a slave I will not be;
And troth, proud lady, thy haughtiness
Will sever my heart from thee!

At times, my lady, so sweet art thou,
That I cannot burst my chain;
And though I know that thy yoke is hard,
Forthwith I'm a slave again!

But now my lady too far has gone,
I swear that I will be free;
And haply, fair lady, thou'lt weep to find
That I as haughty can be!"

The noise in the ante-room increased to a babel of voices, and Lady Murch and Mary went out to meet them; so that Herbert, finding his finale likely to lose its effect, ran his voice up the scale, gave a long shake on a high falsetto note, and returned to the key-note on a shower of well-executed triplets.

"Bravo! bravo!" shouted Sir Joseph; and in the storm of applause, Gwendoline escaped to the drawing-room, which was now beginning to fill. She did not know whether to cry, to laugh, or to be indignant; but a tumult of feelings excited her, till she looked quite beautiful.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" asked Mr. Reid, drawing on his white gloves. The music was beginning, and Amy's feet were dancing already.

"May I have the pleasure?"

"Are you engaged for this dance?"

Now, all were whirling away. Even Sir Joseph was tempted to join by the baby face and disappointed look of the little sixteen-year-old Susie Gray. Never was there such a merry dance, never a better partner than fat Mr. Macdown, who danced more lightly and airily than anybody in the room, and who, as Captain Lawrence expressed it afterwards, "should be termed Thistle-Down." Valse succeeded valse; lancers were few and far between; quadrilles were left out altogether, and the evening went on.

"May I have this dance at least, Miss Gwendoline?" said Herbert, rather savagely.

"So sorry, I am engaged."

"The next, then?"

Gwendoline looked innocently at her card.

"I am afraid."

"Third, fourth, fifth?"

"Had you not better ask me again? I am engaged for the next five—no, six."

"To be treated again as you have treated me the whole of the evening—I will not have it. Will you tell me who you dance this with?"

"Mr. Macdown."

"Oh, never mind him!"

"The best dancer in the room; ask me to throw over any one else."

"The next, then?"

"Lord Firton."

"Well, forget him."

"A stranger—impossible! And after that Sir

Joseph; of course, I could not throw him over,—and then."

"This is our dance, Miss Gwendoline!" The music struck up one of the newest valses, and the couple whirled away. Herbert folded his arms and stood gloomily leaning against the wall.

"If you are not dancing, Mr. Herbert," said Lady Murch, "would you mind just having one valse with Miss Price? I think she would like it."

"With all the pleasure in life." Lady Murch sailed away. The instant she was out of sight Herbert fled; he ran down the back-stairs, meaning to lie *perdu* until the dance was safely over.

"Another dance, please, Bertha."

"But I am sure people will remark it, George, Look at Lady Murch; she is watching us now. Oh, what a hypocrite she must think me!"

"Never mind if she does."

"But I should not like to lose her good opinion, she has been so very kind to me."

"We will ask her to come and see us some day. Come out into the ante-room for a little fresh air;" and they strolled away together.

In the further ante-room tea was placed. A door in this room led into the dining-room, which was not yet opened officially for supper. Bertha and George Leslie found this room empty, already arranged with cold refreshments, and only half lighted. At the end of the room they seated themselves on a low sofa, glad to get out of the gay scene for a few minutes alone. They were occupied with each other entirely

when the door opened softly and Gwendoline came in. She started when she saw them, and a look of surprise came over her face.

"I was going down to see if I could help Amy," she said; "Lady Murch wishes to have supper at once."

"I think everything is ready," said Bertha, trying to hide her confusion.

"Amy is gone down, so I think I will go also," said Gwendoline; and she ran down the back-stairs, and Bertha and George once more forgot all embarrassment, and plunged again into the old story that is ever new.

Gwendoline ran downstairs to the kitchen. The sound of the music was ringing in her ears; perhaps it was that that made her cheeks so flushed and her eyes so brilliant. Amy was not in the kitchen; no one was there except Mrs. Jones, who was asleep before the fire, looking so marvellously peaceful that Gwendoline felt positively startled. She had left the kitchen door wide open, and she could hear some one stirring in the pantry, even coughing a sort of cough which to her overstrained ears seemed to be significant. She stood before the kitchen fire trying to make up her mind, to bend her proud spirit. She found herself growing more and more indignant, twisting her gloves round and round.

Mrs. Jones stirred in her sleep. Gwendoline went half way to the door, then back again. Her heart beat so fast she felt as if she could scarcely breathe.

"He had no business to say it; I won't go to the

pantry," she said to herself; and strengthening her resolve she turned and left the kitchen.

Half way upstairs she heard the door at the top open; some one was coming down; in one moment it would be too late. She flew downstairs again without pausing to think, burst open the pantry door, and panting and defiant stood before Herbert Montgomery.

"I have come," she said; "and what now?"

Sir Joseph and Miss Highclere were treading a measure together. Her black satin rattled over the floor with stiffness; her severe features were unbent, as she would herself express it, and wore a kindly smile.

"It is really a pleasure and encouragement to me, dear Sir Joseph," she was saying, "to see the admirable way in which this household succeeds. I see here the beginning of many and many a happy and contented year for yourselves, your one offspring, and your helps. All is in such perfect harmony—ages and occupations so well assorted—I congratulate you upon having succeeded in putting your establishment on a footing likely to last with comfort and happiness as long as this mortal coil——"

She paused.

"I hope so, Miss Highclere," said Sir Joseph. "It is very pleasant to see how the young things are enjoying themselves to-night."

"This dance over, Sir Joseph, I strongly advise a period of quiet hard work, sobriety, and tranquillity; I will speak to Lady Murch about it."

"Do; she always is so happy to follow any advice she esteems so highly."

They made the grand chain, and stood side by side.

"There is the supper-bell, Miss Highclere. Allow me to take you to the dining-room."

Amy's architectural designs were much admired and duly discussed. The fruit was beautiful, the soup excellent; and the guests, duly warmed and replenished, began to take their departure, saying as they did so that they had never before enjoyed an evening so much. The clock struck three as the last guest was about to depart. Lady Murch had a note to write which she was anxious to send by one of her guests, and she went in to her boudoir to do so. Just as she had finished it, Mr. Fox came in begging her to be so very kind as to wait for him half a moment, as he wished to speak to her. He carried off the note.

CHAPTER IX.

A LOW fire burnt in Lady Murch's boudoir as she sat over it waiting till the head footman came back.

"I am so sorry to have kept you, Lady Murch," he said; "and it was awfully good of you to wait. The fact is, circumstances have altered with me, and I wanted to take the earliest opportunity of telling you that I must give up your service, and——"

A knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in," said Lady Murch. "Mr. Fox," she said, holding out her hand to him as Herbert came in, "I am very, very sorry; we will talk of this another time."

Herbert started, and looked inquiringly at Fox.

"Yes," said Lady Murch, answering his look, "I am grieved to lose Mr. Fox."

"Lady Murch, I hope it will not put you to inconvenience," exclaimed Herbert; "Fox really must stay on, for, indeed, I must positively leave in a month; most important reasons."

"I don't know what I shall do," said Lady Murch.

"Perhaps we may be able to settle something to-morrow; it is so very late now. Another knock!"

Gwendoline and Bertha both came in, looking so

conscious and rosy that Lady Murch threw up her hands.

"Now, don't say that you are come to give me up also; don't say it, please!"

Half laughing, half crying, the whole story came out. Lady Murch could say nothing; she let them have their say, and then sent them all away, and went upstairs half disturbed, half delighted with all that had occurred.

She was in her bedroom, dressed in her white dressing-gown, when once more the door flew open and Mary came in. She threw herself on her knees, hiding her face in her mother's lap, exclaiming:

"Oh, mamma, mamma! I shall never, never be happy again unless I marry the footman!"

"What will your papa say?"

"He is so pleased! Do, mamma, say Yes!"

Her daughter gone, Lady Murch was not yet to be allowed to go to rest. She was just about to get into bed, when once more her door opened, and there entered three figures, tall, prim, clad in white dressing-gowns and frilled nightcaps. Hand in hand they advanced to her, weeping. They said—

"We have heard all, dear, dear, dear Lady Murch, and we have come to tell you that I, Agatha Burden; I, Selina Price; and I, Amelia Burden, will never, never leave you."

The following morning, as soon as she was downstairs, after breakfasting in her bedroom, Lady Murch sent for Colonel Clarence.

All the high spirits were subdued, partly by

fatigue and partly by the serious nature of all that had occurred.

All the morning private interviews were going on, and one after another, those that had given warning were sent for. Mrs. Jones, who knew nothing, declared rapturously that things were righting at last, that her kitchen-helps were learning to keep themselves to themselves, and she might hope for better times, so quietly and steadily the kitchen-work was done.

Colonel Clarence had fortified himself with all the information he could obtain for Lady Murch. He pleaded for forgiveness for Herbert Montgomery, the greatest culprit of all, acknowledging that it was very wrong; a wild game altogether that he had played, but that Lawrence was quite as much to blame. It turned out afterwards that the character and recommendation were for quite a different person—a certain Jacob Herbert, a decrepit young man, who had hitherto failed in everything he had undertaken; but a ten-pound note and a promise of more had induced the youth to allow Herbert Montgomery to slip into his place. He pleaded his own cause, the determination he had made to win Gwendoline, who in former days had refused him twice, and the difficulty of approaching her in any other way. And Lady Murch was forced to forgive him, especially as her own husband was charmed with the story, which awoke a long dormant spirit of romance in his breast. Fox was so great a favourite with them all, that every one was pleased with his engagement to

the daughter of the house, notwithstanding his want of fortune. And George Leslie made his pretty betrothed more than happy by undertaking to finish her beloved brother's education at Eton and Cambridge.

"There is only one little face that is very sad to-day," continued the old Colonel.

"I am sorry to hear that. Whose is it?" said Lady Murch.

"It is little Amy Gordon, the pastry-maid, who will be left behind. But Macdown has been throwing so much energy into comforting her, that I cannot help thinking——"

"Stop, stop, stop!" cried Lady Murch, holding her ears—"tell me no more."

"I was only going to say, that with Sir Joseph's interest, that post in the British Museum——"

But Lady Murch was gone; and in her place, facing the bewildered Colonel, stood the helmeted form of Miss Highclere.

"Good-bye, Colonel Clarence," she said, "I am just going."

"There is an old proverb about a falling house," murmured the Colonel.

She did not hear rightly.

"Did you ask the reason of my abrupt departure?" she asked, grimly. "It is because I consider the whole concern to have turned out a perfect *fiasco*."

THE LADY CANDIDATE.

Part I.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun was shining full on the bare rocky mountains that close in the valley of the Tamina, in which Ragatz is situated. The light sharpened each hard outline of the peaks, and caught the glass windows of the Quellenhof Hotel, making them blaze hotly. In front of the great hotel lay its well-laid-out garden, with dazzling gravel-walks, edged with trees trained into fat green wigs on a single stem. The band played invitingly, the fountains splashed, the visitors sat at little marble tables, drinking coffee, or aimlessly walked about, splendidly dressed in all the colours of the rainbow, and their loud German gutturals filled the air with a sensation as of sharpening knives. In the *salon* on the ground floor a young lady in blue muslin was persecuting a piano, which, from its appearance, must have come to Ragatz suffering from rheumatism also, for it wore a green baize shirt and trousers.

Through the *salon* into the verandah, with very hurried steps, came two young ladies, and as they opened the glass door, one whispered to the other—

"She is playing again, Rhoda; I wish there were some means of preventing it; it is perfectly intolerable."

"Never mind, it is the best of her two pieces. Oh! that chord; I have learned to expect it now. How she can—each time, is incomprehensible to me!"

"I peeped into the piece," said Rhoda, "and I see that it is a misprint: the sharp has got attached to the E flat, and the flat to some other note."

They emerged into the verandah; a tall, fair-moustached gentleman had just left a comfortable little table under its shade, and conveying blotting-book and ink-bottle in one hand, a chair in the other, and his pen in his mouth, was seeking about for a little corner out of hearing of the music within.

"I wonder whether Captain Somers is taking the baths himself, Rhoda," said the younger of the two girls, putting up her parasol.

"No; it is his friend that takes them. I hear from the bath-woman that he takes two baths a day, and six glasses of that lukewarm water which I hate so much."

"Don't be ungrateful, Rhoda; it has done you a great deal of good."

"But I can't help thinking that you look a little pale, Annie," said Rhoda Langdon, affectionately. "I hope you do not feel the heat too much."

"Oh, no! I delight in the place, and am very sorry that we have only two days left. Where are you going? Shall we not sit under one of these trees a little while? This is the hottest hour in all the twenty-four."

"I must go and see if the English papers have come. I am getting very anxious about the state of affairs at home."

"Rhoda! you do not mean it? you have not said so before; you do not mean that there will be——"

"Yes, I do. I expect a dissolution before the end of the session."

"What shall I do?"

"Leave it to me and do not fuss yourself. We shall be home in plenty of time."

"But I have not looked at a paper since we have been here. I have no more idea what has been going on than Pauline has."

"These things are soon got up. I will help you when the time comes."

"I wish I could get out of it," said Annie, piteously.

Miss Langdon turned round and put her hand on her cousin's shoulder. "You know it is too late for that—you know you are pledged."

"Women have always been privileged to change their minds."

"Annie! don't talk like a child. Not since their emancipation! not since they took their proper station in society, and came to the front in all parts of the world!"

"Oh, hush! Rhodie. I am sure he will hear you; and please don't walk so fast; I cannot keep up with you."

"But why should he not hear me? I make no secret of my opinions."

"But, Rhoda—please, please——"

"You are a foolish child, Annie, and quite unfit for the position to which you are destined."

"Yes, I know I am quite unfit; I shall never be able to do it."

"Nonsense; do, for goodness' sake, remember that when a person has pledged his or her word, they cannot withdraw except for some very urgent reason—failing health or——"

"I am not very strong," murmured Annie.

"I never saw you look better in your life, my dear; and as for making a secret with Captain Somers, I cannot see the use of it."

"Not make a secret of it! only say nothing—he knows nothing of your—I mean of our opinions."

"Good morning, Miss Langdon—good morning, Miss Annie."

"Good morning, Captain Somers; I hope your friend is better to-day."

Somers' handsome face clouded over as he answered, "Thanks, I wish I could say that he was; but he caught a chill yesterday morning, and has been in great pain all day; he has just gone to his bath, so I am left to my own resources."

"What a pity; but I suppose one must expect ups and downs."

"I am afraid he suffers a great deal," said Annie, gently.

"Yes; at times the neuralgia is almost more than he can bear; he is wonderfully patient, poor old fellow."

"What should you do under similar circumstances, Captain Somers?"

"I am very much afraid, Miss Langdon, that I should grumble; but you know men are proverbially less patient under pain than women; my friend is an exception to every rule."

"For good?"

"For all that is excellent. Are you on your way to see the news? I suppose I ought to be more anxious than I am, for this dissolution is hanging like the sword of Damocles over my devoted head."

"What? do you mean that you are going to stand?"

"I am indeed; my father's interest is sure to get me in, so I shall not have much trouble, and shall not hasten back, unless I hear of a strenuous opposition started. I should be sorry to leave Burnley before his time is up."

"But I believe every seat will be contested this time. This last Government has lasted so long, and has so amply proved the efficiency of female legislators, that I am persuaded a great many more women candidates will appear in the lists."

"Heaven forbid!"

"But if you will only allow me to point out——"

"Here we are at the *lèse salon*," exclaimed Annie, joyfully; "and, Rhoda, there is no time to lose; there is the fat man in the blue spectacles making straight for the 'Times'—he will get it!" But with one light bound Rhoda Langdon had reached the table, and taken possession of the one cherished 'Times'—from under the very nose of the disappointed gentleman, whose goodly proportions compelled him to move with dignity and reserve. Rhoda sank down on a chair with her prize, and Annie took up the visitors' list with which to amuse herself. Captain Somers drew a chair to the table and sat down beside her.

"There are a good many arrivals," she said—"Son Excellence M. Eugéne de Tchelitine, Conseiller privé, and Senateur-Varsaic, and Mr. Robinson of New York, wife and courier—not a flattering way of putting his suite."

"Look at this one," said he, smiling—"Lady Bigs, London; Sir Marmaduke, and maid—which looks the best?"

"Much of a muchness," she answered laughing. "We have some grandees—the Frau Gräfin von Beicherbach. My maid was much disappointed when she found that the Frau Gräfin was the little old woman in black alpaca, with a flaxen front; and the tall woman in lilac satin, trimmed with lace, was the wife of Scant and Lavineo in Ipswich." Captain Somers seemed suddenly not to be listening.

"Miss Langdon's looks betrayed some news," he said, half-rising from his chair. Rhoda Langdon was

bending over the paper, her face lighted up with excitement, and an expression half of anxiety half of triumph on her very handsome mouth.

"I am almost afraid that it has come," said Annie, her face turning very pale.

"Will it take you away?" he asked.

"At once—instantly," she answered with quivering lips. "I suppose you also will have to go?"

"I suppose so," he said, gloomily.

Rhoda, now starting from her chair, laid the paper down for one second, while she beckoned to the others to join her: that second was enough,—the fat man with blue spectacles was on the alert, and with the rapidity of a flash of lightning had secured the treasure. Annie could not help laughing as her discomfited cousin made her way up to her.

"Annie, wonderful news! He has dissolved Parliament; some of the writs are out already; there is not an hour to lose: the leader says that the closest canvass is anticipated: the most abrupt dissolution since Gladstone's famous one in seventy-three. Heaven grant that we may not be too late."

"But you cannot—indeed, you cannot start to-night," said Captain Somers, eagerly. "There is no train."

"I must see to it—I must pack at once;" and she hastened on towards the house.

"I hope you will not go so very quickly," he said to Annie, as they followed more closely.

"Indeed we must," she said, with a sigh; "I do not see any alternative."

"At least, let us have one more drive together this afternoon."

"I am afraid Rhoda will be too busy to come."

"Then come with us. I am sure Burnley is *chaperon* enough for you."

"Oh yes! I should like it very much if Rhoda will let me."

"Do you always ask her leave?"

"Yes, always; you do not know how good she is to me."

"Well, I suppose you must go," he said, discontentedly, as Rhoda turned round, beckoning. "Remember I shall count on you. I shall order the carriage at half-past three; and you must not disappoint Burnley: he has enough to bear without the added weight of disappointment."

She only laughed as she followed Rhoda upstairs.

Annie Herbert found her cousin already deep in the mysteries of a foreign Bradshaw.

"Stop, stop! don't speak! 5.10—no; 5.5 in the morning gets to Zurich at 9.30. Wait there till 10.5. Very slow train, but the only one. A pencil, Annie. Bâle at 12.46. That would do. Now, do you think we could go on that night, or will it be too much for you? Don't interrupt. Train starts at 11.30; arrives in Paris 5.20 a.m. Can we catch the tidal train? Yes, but it gives us only time to drive straight across Paris to the *Chemin de fer du Nord.*"

"Oh, Rhoda!"

"I cannot stop to talk now, dear; ring for Pauline. We must begin packing at once. We shall be able

to get to London on Saturday at the very latest, or Friday night, and go down on Saturday to Loughtonstone. Here, open my desk—there are the keys—give them to Pauline, and send for the boxes while I run down to make Giorgi telegraph to Scoton. Here, Pauline! how long you have been! What have you got there?"

"A *dépèche*, mademoiselle," and Rhoda seized the telegram she held out.

"Excellent! capital!" she cried to the bewildered Annie. "Scoton says—'Good cottage vacant, close to town. Shall I take it? Have sent down agent.' What a quick fellow he is. I must send off at once Now, Annie dear, begin with your drawing things."

And she was gone.

"*Ces demoiselles* start at once?" asked Pauline.

"Yes, not a moment to lose," answered Annie, half-laughing. "Can you be ready?"

"But—yes, mademoiselle, I will try. But the linen—the boxes! I do not know!"

Annie was looking ruefully at a large sketch half-finished, just in the condition to which a sketch attains after the period of anxiety is over, and that of enjoyment begins. She began to put her drawing materials together with a deep sigh. Both were busily engaged when Rhoda came back.

"That's right, Annie," she said, cheerily. "Pauline and I can easily manage the rest during the afternoon."

"Can you? Then may I go out with Captain Somers and Mr. Burnley?"

"Yes, dear, certainly."

"Why do you put your hand to your head? Not neuralgia again, I hope?"

"No, very little; it is only the excitement; it will go off. Oh, Annie!" she cried, seizing her cousin's hands, "give me a kiss! I have a conviction—a certainty that we are going to victory."

CHAPTER II.

A SMALL carriage wound slowly up the narrow valley of Pfäffers. Annie Herbert and Mr. Burnley sat in it side by side, and Captain Somers walked by them; the driver, also on foot, guided his gaunt horse along the road. At the bottom of the gorge flows, or rather rushes and falls, the little river, too solid a rush of water to break on the stones, and tearing in frothy masses over its tormented bed. On either side close in the rocks, rising to a great perpendicular height, sometimes bending forwards over the valley. It was a slow ascent, though a little more than two miles and a-half. Mr. Burnley, a pale dark-haired man of about fifty years of age, lay back in the carriage, saying little, but enjoying the cooler air of the gorge. His wan face was thin and haggard from suffering, and the expression of the large eyes and compressed lips told of the torments of five years of tic-douloureux.

"I am so sorry that you are going, Miss Herbert," he said, at last. "We shall miss you sadly during the fortnight longer that I must stay here."

"I hope Captain Somers will be able to stay with you."

"He says he sees no reason why he should go for

another ten days. I don't know what I should do without him," he said, wearily. "If I did not know that his seat was secure enough, I would not let him stay. I wonder why you are in such a hurry. I suppose Miss Langdon does not mean to stand, does she?"

"No, not exactly; but——"

"Ah, she is anxious to canvass for some friend, of course, and also to record her vote and yours—yes, yes, of course."

"Do you approve of female members?" she said, hesitatingly.

Mr. Burnley smiled. "It is too late to disapprove," he answered.

"But you think they were very foolish this session, do you?"

"Some were, undoubtedly. But I do think one thing, which is that the cleverest women are out, not in Parliament."

"Do you not think Miss Green very clever?"

"In a way, yes; but Mrs. Thomson is much cleverer."

"Mrs. Thomson! who has never spoken once?"

"Yes, I believe her to be the ablest woman in the House. I am glad Miss Langdon is not going to stand."

"Why?" she said, falteringly.

"I do not consider her adapted for public life. She is too enthusiastic, too superficially educated, too prejudiced, too Radical."

"You are speaking of my cousin," said Annie

who could not avoid a tone of mortification in her voice; "and if you knew her better, I am certain that you would think her, as I do, the very cleverest, most accomplished of women."

"I am sorry I spoke so, my dear," he said, very gently; "only I should not like to think that you would be hand-in-glove with a Radical female member."

"But I am a Radical," she faltered.

"Well, perhaps some day you will change your mind, who knows? Look—how beautifully the light has caught the top of that huge mountain! I shall wait in the carriage at the hotel, while, if you like, Hugh can take you into that wonderful cavern-like gorge."

"I wish one could drive up to the source. I fear that you will be obliged to leave Ragatz without having seen it once."

"I hope not."

He leant back wearily. Slowly they climbed on, the carriage having now and then to drive close under the rocks to let another pass it on the very narrow road. At last they reached the barrack-like hotel, where the gorge became too narrow for a road, and Captain Somers came up to them.

"Would you like to come on with me, Miss Herbert?" he said, anxiously.

"Yes," she said, adding to her companion, "if you do not mind; we will be very quick."

"No, no, do not mind me; this cool air is quite delicious after the heat of the valley: but you must take a shawl, it will be very cold in the rocks."

"Thanks."

Somers, standing on the carriage-step, rearranged his friend's air-cushions with the tenderness of a woman; then, with a cheery "Good-bye," the two walked off together. Mr. Burnley looked after them with a slight sigh, and an expression full of affectionate interest. Annie looked very pretty, following Hugh, with the light shining on her lovely fair hair, and checkering her little white gown.

They entered the hotel, through which visitors are obliged to pass, and crossing by a wooden bridge the foaming torrent, entered the gorge of Pfäffers: a narrow boarded path close under the rocks overhung the river, which, angry before, here seemed to have become furious.

For some paces they went on along the path, and now the huge rocks closed overhead, and only now and then parting or splitting aside admitted a sheet of misty light; it was very dark, and the constant drip made the path slippery, and for some time Annie's whole attention was occupied by keeping her footing; a nervous, breathless awe seemed to come over her also in this wild place, where all was one unceasing roar and dash of water. Now the path became so dark and slippery that Hugh Somers turned back and offered her his arm, and they went on together.

"Look there!" he said, suddenly, for the rocks had broken open, and a wonderful gleam of straight light streamed down; far, far above they caught a glimpse of waving green on the top of the mountain.

"Here we are at the source," he said, as they came on to a small plateau—three narrow doors in the solid rock, and between them a fountain from which the water fell. Two of the doors were closed, but through their chinks poured hot steam; the third was open, a red light shone from it, and the air was very hot.

"Dante's Inferno," whispered Annie.

"Yes, the red light of the old guide is very suggestive. Shall we go in?"

An old man, who might have been the spirit of the place, in garments which appeared moss-grown, and a knotted beard like grey lichen, appeared at the door, and stood in a cloud of steam.

"Un poco piu basso, amico mio," whispered Annie, as Hugh Somers disappeared into the rock; then half laughing, to shake off the awe of the place, she moved away to the edge of the path, and holding the wooden railing, looked down on the torrent: it was a strange scene, all seemed so wild and lonely, and she walked back along the path into the darkness, and stood under a huge black rock watching the shaft-like lights. She started when her companion rejoined her.

"Will you have some water?" he said, holding out a shining, dripping glass full of water from the source.

"Thanks. I should be glad if it were fresh and cool; but the warmth of it is unnatural! I have had enough."

He tossed away the water, and returned to restore the glass. "What are you looking at?" he said, rejoining his companion.

"I was looking for old Charon's boat; can you not see him come down, standing upright, with his great brown brawny figure and floating beard, pushing off the rocks with one mighty oar?"

"He must have a good punt."

"And the boat full of cringing, terrified mortals," she continued, unheeding, "clinging to each other on their way to the twilight regions."

"We need not think of Charon yet," he said.

"It is never too early to begin, though we are still young.

'Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.'

But we ought to be going; your friend will be tired of waiting."

"Do not hurry; I shall see so little more of you now. Will you take my arm?"

"Thanks, I can go alone. How dark it is just here."

"Yes; do take care, it is so slippery. Ha! Good heavens!"

In the wet, slippery darkness he saw her stumble, catch at the railings, and fall against them. One of them cracked loudly; there was no real danger, but he caught her in his arms in agony.

"Annie! Annie! my darling! you are not hurt?"

"No, thanks," she said, faintly.

"Take my arm; you must—you shall; tell me you are not hurt. Heavens! what it might have been."

"I am not hurt," she gasped.

"Here, hold my arm—come out of this horrible hole!" and with his arm round her waist he hurried her along.

Before they emerged into daylight, however, she stopped a moment and leant against the rocks.

"You are tired," he said, anxiously.

"Only a little; I will wait one moment."

She stood still, recovering her breath; then taking her companion's arm, they returned to Burnley.

"Why, Hugh, you look as if you had seen a ghost!" exclaimed his friend.

Somers made no answer, but walked off down the road with long strides. Annie looked a little pale, but so sweet and sunshiny that he thought it best to ask no questions.

CHAPTER III.

THE sun was going down, and a rosy light played over the mountains. In front of the circular temple belonging to the band lay a pavilion with a wide portico of Grecian architecture, under which at this hour the world assembled to listen to the band's sweet strains, and to eat ices and drink coffee. There they were all assembled, the German ladies invariably knitting articles of white thread; the German gentlemen smoking in silence, only an occasional burst of conversation breaking in on their ruminating attention to the band, which played the wild, sweet music of the future.

Annie and Rheda came, after a while, to take their customary seats at a round table at the end of the portico, from whence they could enjoy a view of the whole assembled company.

"Alas! for the last time," said the latter, sadly, as the smiling little German maid filled their cups; "and in all this time she has never learnt that we never take milk in our coffee."

"There are all our old friends, as if assembled on purpose for a last sight. The paper-snatcher looks hungry and pale; I am afraid he did not keep the 'Times' he got in so mean a way?"

"And there is the Frau Baronin with her two sons, one as usual on each side; and Piggy—only look at Piggy's face, now that she is giving him some of that mountainous ice! A loving satisfaction beams over it."

"I do not see the Hungarian general. Yes, there he is, with his contralto daughter. I shall never forget that magnificent voice: it was the most wonderful thing I ever heard. I wonder if we shall ever hear it again."

"It will be all the same a hundred years hence," answered Rhoda, lightly; "look at the mountains."

Slowly the light kept rising, like a delicate rose-coloured veil unfolding upwards, till the valley lay in shade, and a faint cool breeze began to blow.

Mr. Burnley and Hugh Somers strolled up to them, and the band burst into a new strain. They mounted the steps, and seated themselves by their friends to listen.

"To-morrow you will be rushing away into the glare of the world again, Miss Langdon," said the latter, sentimentally.

"I think we have had almost enough of this sort of life," she answered, briskly.

"Enough of Arcadia?"

"Is this your idea of Arcadia?" she asked, a little sharply.

"Well, I do not know that it is a misplaced idea. Arcadias are relative; but it is really the poetical ideal—warmth, sunshine, flowers, and bowers, incessant amusement; your one business to lave your

weary limbs in life-giving waters, in porcelain baths, or dry them on marble floors; to drink iced wines, criticise your neighbours, love, honour, and obey your doctor; and so glide down life without a care."

"And how about the twinges of rheumatism and agonies of incipient gout?"

"Where is the Eden without its serpent?"

"As you said, Arcadias are relative."

"May I ask your idea?"

"The House of Commons," she answered, abruptly. It was all that Burnley could do not to laugh. He swallowed a mouthful of coffee convulsively; but Rhoda looked so handsome as she said it—her dark eyes flashed, the rich colour mantled in her cheek—that Somers could not help admiring her.

"You should stand, Miss Langdon, by Jove!" he said.

"I would, if I had the money," she said, briefly.

"If you would only take my seat from me, my father's interest would return you free of expense; but, unfortunately, he is very old-fashioned, has a horror of the female members, and I am afraid would disinherit me were I even to suggest it in the mildest way possible."

Burnley, who was sitting by Annie, could not avoid seeing that the colour had died out of her face, leaving it as white as a sheet. He hurriedly turned the subject.

"I hope we shall all meet in London some time this winter," he said; "and we will avail ourselves of your permission to call on you in your house, Miss Langdon."

"It is not my house," she said, a little abruptly; "it belongs to my cousin."

"It is all the same, Rhoda," said Annie, gently stroking her hand under the table.

"Shall you go straight there?"

"Yes—no—I cannot quite tell; plans cannot be decided until the election is over."

"I hope my father and sisters will make your acquaintance soon," said Somers. "They always go up immediately after Christmas."

"It will be a great pleasure to us," said Rhoda, a little stiffly. Annie wished to say something, but the words would not come.

"Oh, how we shall miss you!" sighed he.

"I fear that we shall find it very dull," said Mr. Burnley, with a sigh. "But ten days of this monotonous life pass very quickly. I cannot believe that you have been here the full time."

"All but two baths—we have, indeed."

"I am sure it is a great mistake not finishing the cure; it takes away half the effect of the waters."

"Two days cannot make much difference; and if it does, you see it cannot be helped. Come, Annie dear, if you have finished your coffee we had better go in; there is still a good deal to do."

"Oh, what a beautiful specimen!" cried Burnley, with the joy of a naturalist, pointing to a fly which had settled on one of the tables; "bright crimson back, opal wings, and such a lovely prismatic stomach!"

"If I can catch it, would you like to have it, Annie?" murmured Captain Somers.

Did she imagine he called her that, or was it true? He spoke so low that she could not be sure.

"Yes," she said. Burnley produced a little bottle of chloroform and a small cardboard box from a side-pocket, and in less than five minutes the beautiful insect was installed as one of Annie Herbert's greatest treasures.

The early morning saw the train slowly winding its way through the valley of the Rhine, passing the lovely Wallenstadt, and crossing wooded, highly-cultivated land, where orchard-trees bowed under the weight of their fruit, the grapes slowly ripened under a loving sun, and Indian corn waved its rich leaves with every passing breath. It was very hot when the travellers arrived at Bâle, so hot that they were glad to lie down in a darkened room till mid-day was over. Annie was tired in the afternoon and remained in her room, while Rhoda went out. Poor little Annie felt very low and woe-begone. The approaching battle had no charms for her; and a few words uttered by Hugh Somers the day before had shattered to pieces all happy dreams of the future in which she had allowed herself a little to indulge. When Rhoda came in she was quite distressed by her pale face and listless manner.

"I have been enjoying myself immensely, Annie," she said. "I have had what I always wished to have, a good long study of the 'Dance of Death.'"

"How very unpleasant!" said Annie; "I hate those pictures."

"They are most interesting! especially as some degree of self-mastery is necessary in order to enjoy them. I was conscious of a certain shrinking from them in repulsion, so I compelled myself to stand before these skeletons, gazing into their hollow eyes, tracing each bony limb, and wondering what they would look like when covered with fair white flesh; and I tried to realise that I myself underneath my skin was an exact counterpart of that gaunt skeleton."

"Did you feel comfortable when you had realised it, Rhoda?"

"I felt satisfied. I am never happy till I can feel that I have overcome any foolish fancy. Knowing what we are, is it not best to face the fact? Everything painful and repulsive should be fairly faced and examined in this world, and then it will cease to be so. You see, not having faced death is the reason that all those unhappy mortals are shrinking away in such terror. Now, at this moment, I feel as if, should that bony hand be placed on my shoulder—— Good heavens! what's that?"

"Only Pauline," said Annie, smiling, as the maid burst suddenly into the room. "You have looked at those horrors too long. I suppose she has come to tell us it is time for *table d'hôte*."

It was late in the evening, and Annie sat out on a little balcony of their sitting-room which overhung the Rhine. She was dressed, all ready to start on their long night journey. She had prepared early in

order to enjoy to the last the delicious freshness of the river. The balcony overhung the water, and from it she gazed down into the grand, mighty-flowing Rhine, as black as the black sky above, and rolling heavily ever onwards. The shadows passing to and fro over the distant bridge streamed in broken spirit-like ripples down the current. Old stories passed through Annie's mind, of lovely Ondines swimming with white outstretched arms, with long hair streaming; of frightful kobolds standing on the dark shore, waiting till an Ondine should come near enough to seize by her floating hair, and draw her to earth and misery. Even now, in the dark, she could almost trace the passage of one of these sweet river spirits. She saw her start from under the bridge, and come floating on playfully, tossing bubbles and spray, which caught and entangled themselves in the quivering lights from the town. On she came, floating, dancing, and playing, and then flew past the balcony, disguised as a tossing, dark wavelet on the rushing Rhine.

"Dreaming, Annie?" said Rhoda's deep voice.

"I am glad you have come, Rhoda," she answered. "I have been dreaming; but I am awake now, and I wanted to speak to you."

"Yes, dear," answered her cousin, kneeling down beside her.

Annie put her arms round her neck, and began to speak with hesitation, looking away down the river.

"Rhoda, when first I made that pledge to contest Loughtonstone, my ideas were very different from

what they are now. I was only a shadow of you then, dear Rhodie, you had taught me so well. Now, lately a new sense has come over me. I cannot quite describe it; but it is a sense of individuality. My childhood has gone for ever." She would not turn round to encounter the anxious, pleading face of Rhoda, but went on—

"I used to think, as so many better and wiser than myself think, that in power of standing alone, of independence and strength, women were more than equal to men. Women are happier unmarried than men are generally—at least, I fancied so."

"Annie! what do you mean? has he said anything to you?"

"Nothing! only once, for one moment, he betrayed himself. He loves me, Rhodie, and I—I am very much afraid I love him too."

"Annie!"

"Wait, Rhoda! hear me to the end. Did you hear what he said yesterday about his father?—he would disinherit him if he even proposed that you should take his place; if it is so—if his feelings are so strong against a friend, who in this age of emancipation has ventured to have an intellect of her own—what would they be should he discover that such an individual had been chosen by his son for his wife? No, Rhoda: with those words all that ended. I must never see him again; he will forget me, whom he has known for so short a time, and some one else will replace me in his heart; and I—I also will forget. I have had a vision, an idea of what that double life must be

that old-fashioned people talk so much about. I have even for a little time believed that it would be best for me, happier, sweeter than that finer life for which you have educated me; but it is all over now. I put myself in your hands. Make a famous woman of me! Teach me to speak to crowds, harangue multitudes, not to falter before the House itself; I am myself again!"

"Annie, I breathe once more."

"Some of your enthusiasm has come to me. I feel as if I could do anything. I am longing to arrive. I shall see my doings, speeches, canvassing, extolled in all the papers; and Captain Somers' haughty, selfish father shall hear of me, admire me in spite of himself; and notoriety and fame henceforth shall be more precious in my eyes than love."

With that the female candidate burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER IV.

THE little borough of Loughtonstone is situated in one of the prettiest parts of England, a mixture of highly-cultivated green country and remnants of old forest land. Loughton Castle was in what might have been called a bad neighbourhood, for it was the only place of any mark near the town. The estate was very large, comprising a large portion of the town; and Colonel Greydon, its owner, was supposed to be always able to carry the seat by his influence. For thirty years he had sat in Parliament himself; then, his son being still too young to take up the hereditary dignity, he caused his brother to stand, persuading him to do so much against his will, till his boy should have had a couple of years in the army at least. But the two years turned out to be nearer four, for the Prussian war having broken out, retirement became out of the question; and after a year's service abroad, the young soldier returned to find his faithful uncle endeavouring with yearning anxiety to get a little pet bill of his own through the House, which caused another year's delay.

Now, with the rapidity of lightning, came the startling announcement that the new writs were out,

and like a thunderbolt fell on the constituents of Loughtonstone the news that their borough was about to be contested. At first, when the news spread, no one would believe it—it was ridiculous, out of the question; and greater still was their astonishment when it was further rumoured that the candidate was a woman. A strange agent arrived on the very day of the dissolution, and took Pineapple Cottage, a little white house, with green shutters and a long balcony, a little way out of the town, in the main street. The agent was wonderfully active; he had organized a committee, appointed a chairman, portioned out the town for canvassing, before the worthy citizens knew where they were; and before the second night was over the constituents awoke to find the whole town placarded with enormous white placards—"Vote for the Female Candidate! Herbert for ever!"

If consternation was great in the town, it was ten times greater in the castle; no one for a while dared to break it to the old Colonel, but it could not be long concealed. Secure in his position, as he imagined himself, he contented himself with telegraphing for his son on the second day; and mounting his favourite old hunter, rode down to the town to call on the Mayor, choose the days most convenient to himself for his son's speeches, and make arrangements for the issue of his address as soon as he should send it. Great was the shock that awaited him. At the first sight of one of Scoton's placards he grew purple, and reined in his horse with a force to which his old companion was unaccustomed. He

did not like contradiction any more than his master did, and, snorting and grunting, he began to kick lustily: the Colonel reined him in, striking him lightly with his reins as he bent forward to read the hateful inscription—"Quiet, sir, quiet!"

At this moment a crowd of boys and young men came past, evidently already in the excitement of an impending election, and seeing the placard, and the old Colonel on his horse kicking in front of it, they shouted, mischievously:

"Long live the female candidate — Herbert for ever!"

Colonel Greydon relaxed his rein, and turning his horse, spurred that indignant animal, making it gallop out of the town, and did not stop till it stood snorting before the castle door.

Two or three days passed, and every day fresh advances of the Radical canvass were reported, but the candidate had not yet appeared; and the proud old Colonel determined that less should be done than usual—he would not enter into competition with a female—he would not call her a woman.

Sunday morning came, one of those brilliant sunny days in hot August that seem all alive with happy insect life, all silent from the work of busy man.

The castle stood in a part of the park which had been old forest land: the round tower only remained of an Edwardian building; the rest had transformed itself into a large roomy country-house; the comfortable drawing-rooms and library were on the ground-

floor, with windows opening on to the forest ground. The Colonel would allow no smooth lawn or flowers in front; all such were banished to the back or western side, where a pretty flower-garden lay.

It was breakfast time, the hot rolls and yellow butter already set out, the mirrors shining brightly and reflecting all the pretty decorations of that sunny breakfast-room. Outside the French window, waiting till their father should appear, strolled two very pretty brown-haired girls. One of them held an evening paper in her hand, and both had an expression of amused anxiety on their faces.

"What shall I do, Amy?" said the elder; "shall I give it to papa as if nothing had happened, and let him find it out for himself?"

"Wait till he has had his breakfast."

"But he is sure to ask for it at once."

"Very well, Alice, only turn it so that it does not come on him at once as too much of a shock. What a lovely morning!"

"It will be delicious, walking to church."

"Come along, girls," sounded from the open window, and they went in, Amy putting the alarming paper with an air of too obvious unconcern upon a side-table.

"Is that the evening paper? Give it to me, and make my tea quickly, child; I am rather late this morning."

While Alice applied herself to her tea-making, the Colonel crossed his legs, adjusted his gold eye-glasses on his nose, and leaning back in his chair, held the

paper some way from him and skimmed through its contents.

"Hullo!"—the two girls started and looked at each other guiltily: but the Colonel said no more; he tossed aside the paper as if it had stung him, and with a frown which almost made his grey eyebrows meet, cracked his egg.

"When did your brother say he would come, Alice?" he said, gruffly.

"He said in his last letter about Tuesday week, papa; but, of course, he could hurry home if you wished it."

"Not I; he shall not hurry home a single day sooner. I will have no show of opposition made."

"Not even to remove the new placard, papa?"

"What new placard?"

"The one on the lodge-gate."

"Impossible!" shouted the Colonel.

"Is there anything in the evening paper, papa?" said the privileged Amy, mischievously.

Colonel Greydon tossed the paper over to her, and buttered his toast with would-be tranquillity.

"Read the address," he said; and Amy read a little nervously:—

"'TO THE ELECTORS OF LOUGHTONSTONE BOROUGH, STONESHIRE.

"'GENTLEMEN AND LADIES,—I come before you for the first time as candidate for the honour of representing you in Parliament. Having so short a time before me for making the personal acquaintance of

this important constituency, I announce immediately my principles and intentions. Gentlemen and Ladies,—I am a Radical; I am a female. I am a strong advocate for the Abolition of Spirituous Liquors Bill. I hold strongly to the establishment of the Rights of Females to sit in the Cabinet Bill; also of the General Redistribution of Property Bill. I shall vote, should you honour me with your confidence, for the Mixed Compulsory Upper Classes Education Bill, to be introduced this session; and will do my best to forward all bills tending to increase the progress and emancipation of our country from the trammels which are cast about it by the intolerance, ignorance, and tyranny of those who would oppress the majority of the English people—the weaker majority, weakened by oppression, by denial of the rights of education, to which every English female is entitled—weakened by the tyranny which has been exercised for countless ages, but which this glorious century has begun to cast away, so that the future of our country rises like a rising sun, more brilliant, perhaps, for the darkness of the night—and over England's people, her laws and statutes, shall reign that majority which has learnt its long dormant power at last. Ladies and Gentlemen,—I claim your indulgence to one who stands forth for the first time in a public capacity; and should you favour me with your confidence, I shall make it the business of my life to forward your interests and add to the importance of your borough.

"'ANNIE HERBERT.'"

The Colonel was stamping about the room before she had done reading, but when it was over he came back.

"Get on with your breakfast, girls," he said. "You are dawdling so much that the servants will have a scramble to be ready for church."

They obeyed, saying no more about the sore subject.

In another half-hour the three were on their way to church, walking down a green grass path through the part of the park which they called the Forest: the trees at places touched each other overhead, forming a cool covering and shade from the August sun. About a mile of green woodland walk brought them to the church, a small, beautiful building built by Colonel Greydon for the use of his own tenants and the villa portion of the straggling town, which was some way from the parish church.

After service, as they came out, Amy touched Alice's arm:

"Look, Alice, look—there they are."

"Who? What?"

"The female candidate and her friend."

"Come this way and let me see. Ah! it is easy enough to see which is the candidate and which is the friend."

"The dark one, of course?"

"Unquestionably."

"Come along," said the Colonel. "What are you lingering for?"

"It is the female candidate, papa, and her friend."

"Well, what does the brazen hussy look like?" he said, striding on.

"Very dark and handsome, with such a determined face and such a lovely gown; it must have come from Paris."

"But the friend, papa," cried Alice, "is quite lovely; a little blue-eyed thing with exquisite golden hair, and the colour coming and going in her cheeks like a child; she does not look more than eighteen."

"Poor misguided child, she ought to be whipped and sent to bed."

All the resentful flush of eighteen mounted into Amy's face.

"After all, papa," she began, "women have a right to——"

"To what, my dear?'

"To—to——"

"To make fools of themselves; yes, my dear, as much as men. Far be it from me to deny such rights."

And they went in.

CHAPTER V.

"NOW, Annie, you must do it; let us make haste and get it over."

"Rhoda, I can't; indeed I can't."

"Come, make haste; we have a great deal of canvassing to get through to-day."

"But his own lodge—what will they think of us? Has one really a right to interfere with his own people?"

"Nonsense; conscience, intellect, and votes are free—cannot be let or sold now-a-days, thank heaven;" and Rhoda Langdon pushed past her friend, and knocked at the door of John Brand, the lodge-keeper of Greydon Castle.

"Come in, ladies; take a seat, ma'am," said Mrs. Brand, ushering them in. "Very glad to see you, ma'am; it is rare hot weather to be sure."

"I hope you are quite well," said Rhoda, amiably.

"Pretty well, thank you, ma'am. I enjoys good health as a rule, I does, and thank heaven for *that*, which am the mother of nine, and the youngest troubled with his teething, and don't get no better though I've given him a sight o' soothing-syrup; he's a hearty chap, he is, and takes a deal more nor the

others did, bless 'im; but it don't seem to do him so much more good neither."

"How old is he, Mrs. Brand?" said Annie, gently.

"Better nor thirteen months, he is, and a finer baby nor he is of his age ye'll not see on a summer's day, though I say it as shouldn't, being the mother o' nine, and have brought 'em all up, bless 'em; but I'll not deny as I've one as is a poor thing, a very poor thing, and 'as given me a good bit o' trouble in my day."

"Poor little thing!" said Annie. "How old is she?"

"Well, Tom, he's nine, and Bill's eight, and Betsy's seven, and Jack's six. I'm thinking as Sairy-Anne must be five, to be sure."

"What is the matter with her?" said Rhoda, abstractedly.

"Well, ma'am, I can't say as there's anything really the matter with her; but she's a poor thing, pale-like, and cries awful sometimes. I think it's something of a pine. Here, Sairy-Anne, come and speak to the ladies; come, drop your curtsy. Here she is, ma'am, and many a time I think as I'll not rear her."

The pale, overgrown child twisted her apron wonderingly.

"I know something that would certainly do her good, Mrs. Brand," said Annie, eagerly. "May I send you a bottle of it for her? It is cod-liver oil."

"Indeed, miss, and I thank you kindly, and I'll be too glad to give her the oils. Mrs. Jones, as keeps

the little shop, first turning down Hammoth Lane, she'd two as went off in a pine, much as this'n's going off, and the oils did them a sight o' good. She'd buried four, she had; but she was a weakly one herself, she was."

"I will bring you the bottle to-morrow," said Annie.

"Now, my good woman," began Rhoda. "I want to talk to you about more serious things. Do you take much interest in the political crisis now hanging over the town?"

"Ma'am."

"Is your husband a Radical or a Conservative?"

"'Decd, ma'am, and it's more than I can say—my husband were always true blue; but he says to me yesterday, 'Nance,' he says, 'if either o' them 'lectioneering misses come to this here house, you leaves 'em to me.' And they've not come anigh the place. 'What could they want with the like's o' us?' says I; and my husband flushes up, and he says, says he, 'One man's vote's as good as another, and it's worth their trouble to see what they can get.' He's a hasty man, is my Tom, he is, bless 'im."

"Is your husband at home now?" asked Rhoda, growing rather red.

"Yes, ma'am, he is; but, lawks! you're none of them as canvasses, are you, ma'am?"

"Yes, I am," said Rhoda, calmly; "and in a few moments' conversation I think I shall be able to convince him."

"Convince my Tom? Law bless you, ma'am, it'll

take a sight o' time to do that; but I'll tell him you are here—he's in the kitchen."

"I think I will go to him, if I may," said Rhoda, feeling that to expound her views before this voluble mother of nine was little short of an impossibility. "Annie, will you wait for me here?"

Annie was only too glad; and turning with great eagerness to the lodge-keeper's wife, entreated to be allowed to see the baby. Mrs. Brand merely lifted a shawl off something in the corner, and displayed the most beautiful baby Annie had ever seen, lying in a profound sleep; its little dimpled hands were on the blue cotton coverlet, its soft brown curls were tossed all above the pillow, the rosy mouth a little open, and the round cheeks flushed with sleep.

"Oh, what a beautiful boy!" she said, bending over him.

"And he is indeed, bless him, and a regular Rooshian he is when he's up and about, for he's stout on his legs already, ma'am—the earliest on his legs as I've had, 'cepting Lizzie, as walked at eleven months. Miss Alice said as this here one was a progeny; and she says as she will give me some little sweeties as'll make him better with his teeth, which I hope it may, and as I wasn't to use no more o' the 'Blessing to Mothers,' which it's on the bottle, and a beautiful inscription about the little sufferer."

"She is quite right," said Annie. "Does she often come and see you?"

"Most every day she or Miss Amy drops in, or the Colonel after Tom, or Miss Alice after Lizzie and

Tom, as is in her class, and mostly stays for a few words with a body."

"You must be very fond of them?"

"Fond! ay, that we are, we as have seen 'em born, so to speak; leastways I have, for I were called in when the Colonel's lady was took ill, and Miss Amy she were three days old—and a poor thing she was, bless her!—when her poor dear mother were took ill, and died in a week, and the Colonel were never the same man after that, turned as grey as my Tom is now, and that were nigh on eighteen years ago. Blest if that isn't Miss Amy a-coming up the garden-gate, and all her dogs with her, bless 'em! Fond of 'em! I should think we were, to be sure." And she hastened to open the door and admit her visitor.

Annie hung timidly back as Amy Greydon came in, followed by three Skyes and a fine fox-terrier. Amy was talking eagerly.

"I am so sorry about it, Mrs. Brand, and it shall not happen again; but Nettle has become so very mischievous, that I can scarcely control him at all."

"Bless you, miss, don't think no more about it—it's but one chicken, after all; and, bless you, the Captain's dog is welcome to it."

"I should not have cared so much if it had been Skye, or Fidget, or Doonah; but Hugh will say that I have completely spoilt Nettle."

Annie could not help sneezing at this moment; her sneeze awoke Amy to a consciousness of her existence; she came cautiously forward.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I did not know that any one was here."

"Has one of your dogs been doing mischief?" said Annie, smiling.

"My brother's dog has eaten a chicken," answered Amy, with grave concern. "Ar-r-r-r-r, Nettle! Ar-r-r-r, bad dog! Ar-r-r-r, chicken! Do you hear? Ar-r-r-r-r."

The dog slunk under the table, and putting its two paws together, begged.

"You see how irresistible he is," said Amy, laughing; "and he does not care for anything I say —bad dog!"

But hearing her laugh, Nettle had jumped up and was wagging his tail. The other Skyes had all sat down; two with smiling faces and red tongues hanging out, the third enjoying a most comfortable scratch.

"Do you always take such a large pack out with you?" said Annie.

"Yes, unless papa wants them; but he has the big dogs to-day: we change about. I had almost forgotten my message, Mrs. Brand. Papa wants Brand by the three oaks at once; there is a little elm to be cut down there. See! he is coming himself."

The latch-gate opened, and the Colonel, twisting his cane in one hand, called lustily, "Brand! Brand, I say!"

Out rushed the lodge-keeper, and Rhoda, finding herself deserted, returned to the parlour.

"Come, Annie," she said; "it is time that we should be going on."

Annie stooped down and kissed the sweet little face of the sleeping child, and bowing smilingly to Amy, followed her cousin. The Colonel and Tom Brand were standing by the gate, and the former seeing two handsome, well-dressed young ladies in his own lodge, lifted his hat courteously.

"Who are they, Tom?" he asked.

The lodge-keeper answered with an irrepressible chuckle, "Law, sir! they be the female candidate!"

The Colonel turned sharply on his heel.

"Well, Rhoda, and how have you fared?"

"Not so well as I could wish," she answered. "Can stupid ignorance go further? He listened to all I had to say, and I was quite fluent to-day—you know how fluent I can be sometimes; and when I had finished, he said (it was so coarse, Annie)—he said, 'All right, ma'am; but I, for my part, thinks as women ought to keep their proper places.' 'Define!' said I—'Define!' he answered: 'well, I'll define, asking your pardon, if I seems rude—Which were made first, Adam or Eve? Adam, in course; and what were Eve made for?' For the first time, Annie, since I began to think about these things, I was puzzled to answer, only because of the ignorance of the creature; and he actually got up and fetched a large Bible, and read out in *such* an accent, 'And the Lord God said, It is not good that man should be alone; I will make an help meet for him.' 'And that's why woman was made, ma'am, and no mistake—because

it wasn't good for man to be alone, and for no other reason in life; and I should like to see my missus a-disputing of it.' Then he began to harangue me. I'll never go near the house again!" Annie could not help laughing, though Rhoda's face was flushed and her lips pouting.

"We must not be disheartened by a first rebuff," she said. "I have been more fortunate; I made great friends with Mrs. Brand."

"And I saw you kissing the baby; you are the best canvasser, after all, Annie."

Part II.

CHAPTER VI.

"I AM so tired to-day, Rhoda, I think I shall not be able to go out this morning."

"But we did not finish our task yesterday, and there is the whole of Hammoth Lane to do to-day. Do you think, dear, we could do the White Cottage and Ivy Bank this morning only,"—she spoke coaxingly—"and leave all those dirty little shops for the afternoon? Scoton says we are getting on wonderfully in the lower town; but he is astonished at the small show of resistance. I suppose they are waiting till young Greydon comes home: they have no placards up; his address is not even out. Sometimes I fancy we shall simply walk over the course; but Scoton scouts that idea. I believe he is longing for a close contest. Well, what do you say to Ivy Bank and the White Cottage, dear?"

"Very well," said Annie, wearily; "it is just eleven. I will go and get my hat."

"And while you do so, I will wait in the garden in case any one should pass."

"Who did you say lives at Ivy Bank, Rhoda?" said Annie, as they started on their walk.

"The two Miss Hales," answered Rhoda, consulting her canvassing-book; "their brother, a navy surgeon and staunch Liberal—people of some fortune and influence."

"I hope not *very* formidable old maids," sighed Annie.

"Oh no, don't be afraid; I feel every confidence now that we have got into such regular swing. Here we are!"

The bell startled the visitors by the violent and prolonged ringing that it made; but they had become very impatient before it was answered, and Rhoda was half inclined to try another peal. However, the door opened at last, and an uncouth-looking maid stood before them, whose shining scarlet hands betrayed a rapid plunge into a pail of cold water before she came upstairs.

"Missus ain't at home," she said, gruffly.

"Then perhaps Miss Agatha is?"

"Miss Agatha don't see people alone."

"But at least take my message, girl."

"Can't, ma'am."

"Nonsense! Do as you are told."

"But, please, ma'am, missus said as Miss Agatha wasn't to see nobody, she says."

"What slavery in this free country!" muttered Rhoda.

"My good girl," she said, "Miss Hale has no more right to prevent her sister from seeing us, than I have to—to—order you about."

The girl grinned.

"How old is Miss Agatha?"

"Something about forty, ma'am."

"And what's your name?"

"Anna, ma'am."

"Well, Anna, if you do not go to Miss Agatha, and tell her from me that I shall be much obliged to her if she will give me the honour of a few minutes' conversation, I shall ring this bell till some one else comes."

"Lawks! now don't do that, ma'am; I'll go, and welcome."

And the girl departed. After another interval of waiting in the hot doorway, she came back, and led the way into the parlour, a small room so darkened by green venetian blinds that at first they could see nobody in it; then somebody advanced from a corner, and cried in a very loud voice—

"So glad to see you, hurrah! So you've got in in spite of her? Ha! ha! ha!" and then came such a peal of laughter that Annie caught hold of her cousin's gown in terror.

"Have I the honour," began Rhoda, "of speaking to Miss Agatha Hale?"

"Honour! so I'm to get my due at last? Hurrah! Now do, you good dear souls, sit down. Oh, tell me all about it, and make a speech,—do now!" and again she fell into a paroxysm of laughter.

"I will do my best," said Rhoda, seating herself, "to explain to you the principles which have induced my cousin to come forward and contest this borough."

"Do—do now; oh, I am so pleased! I don't know when I've had visitors all to myself—hurrah!—and especially you."

"Especially us!" repeated Annie, timidly.

"Yes; because Jemima said that she would shut the door before your very faces sooner than that you should darken the threshold."

The laughter now was so prolonged that Annie had time to whisper, "Please come away, Rhoda; I am sure she's mad."

"Patience," whispered Rhoda. "Now, Miss Agatha, shall we proceed to business? I understand from our agent that Mr. Hale, your brother, is a Liberal."

"A what?"

"A Liberal; therefore thinking that in all probability you hold the same views, I have ventured to call on you to solicit your vote and the interest you possess on behalf of my cousin, Miss Herbert."

"The female candidate herself! oh law! I shall die;" and she rocked backwards and forwards convulsively.

"Perhaps you have not rightly understood," went on Rhoda, severely. "We have come to ask for your vote; and experience has proved that female members can be most useful legislators. I presume that you read your 'Times'?"

"Only the 'Ladies' Magazine' and the 'Female Banner.'"

"Not the 'Rights of the Day,' or the 'Female Champion'?"

"No, oh no! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Do, my dear lady, make an effort to be serious for five minutes."

"Hurrah!"

The canvassers glanced at each other in dismay. In the green twilight they could see the very stout form of Miss Agatha rolling up and down in such intense enjoyment of laughter, that they felt quite bewildered. Rhoda determined to try again.

"Madam," she said, "will you allow me to point out that this is no laughing matter, but a serious matter of principle, in which right and wrong are involved, and much of the future greatness and usefulness of our country depends upon the results of this general election?"

"Hurrah! How well you speak!"

"But I want to make you understand what the importance of the question is. There is no doubt about it that many measures requiring the peculiar tact for which women are celebrated, will get much more admirably attended to when we are more adequately represented."

"Will they be allowed to bring in at least one baby, as they do at the mothers' meetings?" asked Miss Agatha, very eagerly.

"Imbecile," hovered on Rhoda's lips, but she repressed it vehemently. "No, surely not," she said; "they would disturb the debates terribly."

"But if they cry they are taken out at once," she went on.

"It is impossible, of course," said Rhoda, impatiently.

"Then, that being the case, I am afraid I cannot promise you my vote," said Miss Agatha, with a sudden assumption of dignity.

Rhoda glanced at Annie.

"I am afraid we ought to be going on, Annie," she said, when suddenly the bell pealed through the house.

"It is my sister," said Miss Agatha, shrinking a little.

It is impossible to deny that the hearts of the two canvassers beat rather faster than usual when they heard the steps and voice of the formidable Miss Hale outside.

She came in with a burst —a tall, thin woman, with black eyebrows, and very long arms, strong-minded written on every feature of her stern face. She left the door wide open, and seated herself in front of the cousins.

"Well?" she said.

Rhoda glanced at the open door, and gathering up her courage, plunged into it at once.

"Miss Hale, having heard that your brother is a Liberal, and so, believing that your opinions might tend in the same direction, I have ventured to call, and——"

"Well?"

Rhoda shuddered, but went on:

"I have been explaining my motives to your sister." Here Miss Agatha was seen stealthily trying to gain the door.

"Sit down," said Miss Hale; and she obeyed, only in a very low voice ejaculating a strangled "Hurrah!"

"We—that is, my cousin is desirous of entering Parliament, there to endeavour to advance those views, which, in hopes of inducing you to accord us your votes, I should be glad of an opportunity of explaining to you——"

"Well?"

"We—we hold that——"

"Will you vote for the increased stringency of the law of Compulsory Adult Female Education Bill; for the Abolition of the Degrees of Universities, unless shared by Women; and the new Clause respecting the Expediency of hanging Lunatics without a trial?"

"I—I have never heard of such bills," faltered Rhoda.

"Nor I," was the short answer.

"Madam," said Rhoda, with dignity, "I did not expect to be trifled with."

"Hurrah!" shouted Miss Agatha, bursting into laughter again.

Annie rose this time.

"Rhoda," she said, "I am going. I am sorry that we should have intruded on you, Miss Hale; we will not do so again.

"Heyday!" exclaimed that lady, as Annie, with an unexpected look of dignity on her sweet face, swept by with a bow. Rhoda followed her to the door; but Miss Hale, with an unexpected spring had passed her, and caught Annie's hand.

"No offence, my dear," she said.

Annie looked up, and the tears rushed to her eyes.

"Oh, no," she said, wearily; "every one has a right to their own views."

"And my view is, that you have a glass of wine instantly!"

And before she could stop it, one was procured, and Annie was compelled to drink it, Rhoda looking on rather grimly as she did so.

"You don't look as if you wanted it," said Miss Hale to her.

"No, thank you."

"Well, take care that little thing don't overtire herself, that's all, or you'll be sorry for it."

What happened nobody knew, but Rhoda and Annie found themselves outside the door and in the hot white road again in the twinkling of an eye; and they thought they could distinguish a loud "Hurrah" from within.

"Have you courage for the White Cottage, Annie?"

Annie was struggling between laughter and tears; but she gathered up all her courage.

"I have, if you have, Rhoda."

"I must say I feel rather shaken," answered the strong Rhoda. "Do you think they are both mad?"

"No; I think Miss Agatha is rather, and the other one very eccentric. Oh, dear! her laughter rings in my ears still."

"Let us sit here a moment and recover ourselves."

They seated themselves on a small heap of timber for a few moments.

"Look, Rhoda," said Annie; "I think that man is going to speak to us."

A fat, elderly man in light grey garments, with his hat at the back of his head, came swaggering up to them.

"Very hot, ladies," he said, wiping his brow with a purple silk handkerchief. "I saw you going into the Miss Hales', and I waited about in hopes that you were coming my way."

Rhoda's face lit up.

"May I ask the favour of your name?" she said.

"White—my name's White, ma'am; and a very good name it is. White's Bacon has been known a long time in London, ma'am; and though I'm independent of the knowledge myself, having retired, wife and children from the trade, yet I'll back White's Home-cured against any in England."

"And you live at the White Cottage, Mr. White? We were on our way to call there, but were resting on the way."

"Most happy, ma'am. Allow me to precede you three steps, ma'am. I'm sure Mrs. White will be proud, ma'am. I'm a political character myself, you see; shall be proud to do the honours of my 'umble little home."

And he led the way down the road to the door of the square house, which attracted the eye for miles round by the brilliancy of its whitewash.

Mr. White flung the door open, and with a low bow ushered them into a smart drawing-room, with blinds closely drawn that no particle of sun should reach the furniture. Just putting his head out of the

door, he shouted, "Mrs. W., company!" and returning, seated himself opposite to his guests. "Ladies," he said, addressing himself to Rhoda, "I am a political man myself; and, like every man of experience and forethought now-a-days, I am a Radical. You, I understand, are the same. Now my opinion is, that when a member is returned for a borough, he or she is bound, actually bound, to forward the interests, the private interests, of the principal individuals whose interest has procured election for them."

Rhoda bowed.

"I see that on this point we are at one. Quite so. Now I presume that should the borough return a female member, that that member will undertake not to marry—at least, to resign and offer herself for re-election should she wish to do so."

"I see no necessity for such a condition, sir."

"No, it is natural that you should not, madam; but you must remember that the intellect of woman is still in its infancy."

"Sir!"

"Allow me to continue, my *dear* madam! I and a certain number of my fellow-voters have made this condition imperative before pledging ourselves to return a female member. You see, though our knowledge of Annie Herbert individually is small, our knowledge of females is extensive; and I (I may speak in the singular, being the instigator and propagator of the idea)—and I conceive that a woman, when she marries, generally submits her political opinions to those of her husband."

"No, no."

"Yes, ma'am, yes. I do not say that it ought to be so, or that it will be so, when education has done its part in strengthening the weak and levelling the strong; but it is so at present. I would not object to the election of a woman married for some years, whose actions and character have had time and opportunity of showing that she is independent of influence and above control; but I expect an unmarried woman to take the pledge, because she has been untried; and no one knows what the effect of matrimony will be on her political views—d'ye see?"

"It shows an unfair want of confidence."

"Not at all, ma'am; not at all. But you must see that the one and only object of having a female representative is, that she is more under the influence of the principal men of the borough, more easy to dictate to, more dependent like."

"This is not my view of it, Mr. White."

"Sorry for it, ma'am; but I must insist upon my condition."

"I must have time for consideration."

"Will you address us, ma'am, at the Lion on Monday? I will have my friends together to hear what you have to say. Three days is enough of consideration, is it not?"

"Yes," said Rhoda. "We will consult our agent, Mr. Scoton, and let you know."

The door opened here, and Mrs. White, who had been engaged in donning her best bronze-coloured

silk gown, sailed in, and floated sideways into a chair.

"*So* 'appy to see you, ladies," she said. "Augustus thought that you would drop in. Ring, Augustus."

Augustus did as he was told.

"And perhaps," continued the languid lady, "you can furnish us with a little news. This is such a dull neighbourhood that, except when the Honourable Mrs. Jones is at home, I hear nothing about the *élite*, and it is not what I've been accustomed to."

"We have been abroad for some weeks."

"But I presume you passed the season in London. Did my health permit, as the Honourable Mrs. Jones says, vegetabling in the country is an 'orror."

"We had a very gay season," said Annie, smiling.

"And did you observe what was most worn—trains or *joupe-cour?*"

"Decidedly trains."

The door opened, and a very large page entered, tightly compressed in a buttons uniform, from which it seemed as if his body were endeavouring to escape by forming all manner of abnormal swellings. He placed a bottle of hot-looking sherry and sponge-cake before the lady, who proceeded to help her guests without asking them whether they would take any.

"I have just obtained from Couttox & Grant a *toilette de ville*," she continued. "Train, *plissés* of white or chocolate, gathered in at the waist, falling at back of skirt, and finishing with two large bows and

bouillionnés of white and chocolate, green sash ends as a *négligé* from centre behind, fringe chocolate and white. The Honourable Mrs. Jones often says to me, 'Give me your modes, Mrs. Augustus White, and I'll undertake to be the best-dressed lady in London; and so you might yourself,' she says, 'but for your 'ealth;' and that was said at sight of my blue, though I must confess I like my red the best. I suppose you and Augustus have been talking politics?"

"We have, Mrs. White."

"Ah, I suppose you agree like brother and sister; you look perfectly suited to each other in opinion, I must say."

A slight shiver passed through the frame of the female candidate.

"I am glad he should have something to amuse him, poor dear. A man's so helpless without a club or friends as can sympathise with him."

"Have you no club in so large a town?"

"Bless you, yes, ma'am! we have both a club and a coffee-house—but so coarse and rough. The farmers all belong to it, and there is no delicate discussion of music and the harts as you might enlighten a man's mind with in London. But my health's a sad drawback. A little of your society will be a great gain to Augustus; we will take an early opportunity of calling."

"I hope you will," said Rhoda, rising; "and I will communicate with you," she continued to Mr. White, "through our agent, Mr. Scoton, on the subject of meeting you at the Lion on Monday."

With profound bows on all sides, the female candidate and her friend found themselves once more on *terra firma.*

"Le jeu vaut-il la chandelle?" said Annie, wearily.

"Come, come, Annie; I look upon that as a success."

As they reached their door, they were met by Scoton running to meet them with his hat off.

"Our opposition is not considered so lightly after all, Miss Langdon," he cried. "Captain Somers has been sent for, and has already arrived."

"Captain Somers! why, who is he?" cried Rhoda; for Annie had caught hold of the door-post as white as a sheet.

"Why! the Conservative candidate, to be sure. Colonel Greydon's son!"

"Greydon! Somers!"

"Yes! he was obliged to take his mother's name with some money, I believe, from her father. I don't know the rights of it; but it is good news that they have ceased to consider us of no consequence."

Scoton followed Rhoda into the house, and they were soon deep over canvassing-books. Annie had fled up-stairs to her own room.

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE, the one only and highly-petted son of the house had returned to Greydon Castle, his luggage consisting of four portmanteaus, two hat-boxes, gun-case, fishing-rods, and other paraphernalia. It was just the time for luncheon when he arrived, and he was immediately set down to eat, and answer innumerable questions from his eager sisters. His father, divided between his delight in having his son home again, and vexation that he should have judged it necessary to return quickly for so insignificant an opposition, paced up and down the room, answering questions as quickly as they were asked.

"And Jones is perfectly satisfied that there is no danger, father?"

"Jones says so over and over again; but he is always such an impatient fellow, he does nothing but grumble at your delay in coming home, and he wants you to speak to-morrow night. He has got a meeting and an audience, and they meant to have done their best without you; but he was here five minutes before you came, and when I told him you were expected, he went straight off to the town to proclaim the fact that you would speak to-morrow. He says

that fellow Scoton is making great way in the lower town."

"And now tell me what my rival is like. I met a most charming Miss Herbert at Ragatz, who fascinated both Burnley and myself. Give me some cake, Amy. Thanks; that is rather too much."

"This Miss Herbert is a very tall woman, with very black hair and eyes," said the Colonel; "a woman who has, I hear, a marvellous gift of the gab. She actually tried to canvass Brand—the impudence of it's——"

"Come, that's too bad."

"What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I shall just make the round of my committee, and see how the land lies. Hollo! there's Jones coming posting up the road, nearly black with rage. What's the matter, old fellow?" asked Captain Somers, opening the window.

"Matter! It is time that you were at home, Captain! I can't get the town-hall to-morrow night."

"But do you mean that you had not settled it before?"

"Not I—you see, I have been accustomed to take things easy; it seems it has been engaged this whole week."

"Well, have it to-night. Come, I see we are in for a spirited contest. Send round at once, Jones—not a moment to lose—and we will have our speeches to-night, and beat them in having the first say. I

had better be off at once," he added, to his father; "after all, there is some fun in the thing."

A crowd of eager people filled the town-hall that night to hear their young candidate's first speech. It lasted for more than an hour, and was received with unbounded applause; and for a first speech it was an uncommonly good one—frank, simple, and manly; but it did not need an even moderately good speech to please the audience, with whom Captain Somers had always been a great favourite; and their enthusiasm almost carried them beyond bounds, and prevented their appreciation of the very sterling but less interesting speeches that followed in due course. Colonel Greydon, as he came down from the platform, believed the cause won, and was half inclined to quarrel with the more serious view his son's committee held; they were becoming slightly alarmed at the way the Radicals were advancing; some staunch old supporters had failed, a very large number of the younger voters were supposed to be unsteady; on the female votes Jones declared he could depend to a woman! The meeting ended about half-past nine, but it was long before the hurrahing, noisy crowd dispersed.

About half-past nine o'clock, Annie Herbert and her cousin were returning home from the White Cottage, where they had taken tea with Mr. and Mrs. Augustus White. They had had a very disagreeable evening, Mr. White arguing on the subject of his favourite pledge to be taken by the female candidate; Mrs. White familiar and tiresome; and Annie

was wearied, and Rhoda disgusted. The climax arrived when, as they were leaving the house, Mr. White patted Rhoda on the back, saying, "Ye're the one that ought to stand, my fine girl!" She could scarcely contain her indignation.

It was a fine moonlit night, and they began to loiter a little along the road, watching the beautiful fleecy white clouds sailing over the clear purple sky; the cool air was delicious after the stuffy closeness of Mrs. White's drawing-room. Suddenly Annie caught hold of Rhoda's arm—"I am afraid there is a crowd coming, Rhoda," she said; and it was true that a sound of many voices and tramping feet came up the lane, and the forerunners of the crowd came into view.

"What shall we do, Rhoda? We are a long way from home."

"Walk quietly on, my dear; whatever you do, do not seem to mind," answered Rhoda, with a flushed face.

At this moment the coming crowd caught sight of the cousins, and raised a loud shout, "There they are! there's the female candidate!" and with hisses and groans, and only a few shouts of "Shame! shame!" they surrounded the terrified girls.

The crowd was good-humoured and noisy; but their jests were very rough, and the attempts of some rude boys to tear off Annie's veil were received with shouts of laughter. They looked up and down the road—there seemed no prospect of escape; the crowd, also, was thickening, the rougher part of the town-

hall audience having determined to go to Pineapple Cottage and hiss the female candidate. The crowd was in such a humour that a man might easily have taken advantage of it, and probably turned it to his own account; but, as the pressure became greater, the women became more frightened; they held each other tightly, their great terror being lest they should be separated.

"Put them on the step! let's hear what they've got to say!" shouted one.

"Give 'em a taste of rotten eggs!" cried another.

"Somers for ever! down with the Rads!"

Suddenly there was a pause in the rush and pressure, and Rhoda looked up with a vague hope of relief. The crowd was opposite Ivy Bank, and Miss Hale was standing on the steps, speaking at the top of her voice.

"John! Andrews! Martin! you idiots, what do you mean by this? Don't you know the penalty of rioting at your time of life? Here! stand back! Rubbish and stuff! Out of my way!"

The crowd fell back as the gaunt figure of Miss Hale strode through it, and took the hand of the poor little trembling candidate.

"Get out of my way there!" she cried, administering a sharp push to somebody in the way, and she led them straight through into her house: at the door she turned and shook her head at the grinning crowd. "You go home, you double-distilled idiots," she said, "and don't stand gaping there."

They obeyed, laughing loudly, and breaking into very discordant public-house songs.

No sooner was she safe within doors than poor Annie burst into tears, and could only with an effort prevent herself from becoming hysterical. Miss Hale treated her with very calm wisdom, wisely turning her sister out of the room, who considerably added to poor Annie's inclination to laugh by her repeated "hurrahs." Rhoda tried to help, but was unceremoniously pushed out of the way by Miss Hale, who looked at her with such evident animosity, that it required all Rhoda's gratitude not to betray that the dislike was mutual.

When Annie was better, and lying exhausted on the sofa, Miss Hale ordered round her brougham, late as it was, and sent them home, receiving Rhoda's thanks with scant courtesy. Annie would have said something also; but as the slightest recollection of what had passed made her all but cry again, she only put up her little face to be kissed, and was surprised at the warmth of the embrace she received.

"Hot wine and water, and bed at once, mind," were her parting words to Rhoda—advice she was glad to follow, as her hands were almost as cold and shaking as Annie's.

CHAPTER VIII.

RHODA and Annie were seated in the hot little drawing-room of Pineapple Cottage, each anxiously bending over a manuscript.

"I feel almost in despair, Rhoda," said Annie, piteously. "If I only had the smallest idea what to say!"

"It will come under the influence of excitement, my dear. I can tell you for your encouragement that Scoton says that half the male voters are wild about you, and almost every man we have canvassed personally in the lower town will stand by us."

"What shall I do if—if the Greydons are there?"

"They are not in the least likely to be there; and if they are, why, have you forgotten your resolution at Bâle? It will be a good opportunity of showing them the stuff we women are made of."

"It is quite true," cried Annie.

"Now, don't interrupt me, there's a dear, but just let me get through my speech, and then I will help you with yours."

"Oh, do you think I might read mine?"

"Certainly not; nobody would believe that it is your own; you must only have notes. Now please be quiet;" and they settled anew to their work.

After about ten minutes, during which Annie's brow was furrowed and puckered by anxiety, she wearily rose and looked out of the window. She started back, but not before she was perceived by a passing horseman in the road.

"Rhoda," she faltered, "there is Captain Somers."

"Don't interrupt," said her cousin.

"But he is stopping at the door—he is coming in!"

"Go down to him; don't let him disturb me at this moment," cried Rhoda, abstractedly, and Annie flew downstairs.

Captain Somers was just about to ring at the half-open door, when he saw Annie at the foot of the staircase.

"Rhoda cannot come," she said; "she is too busy."

Captain Somers threw open the door of the little dining-room, and making Annie go in first, followed her and shut the door. He took her hand eagerly.

"Now tell me," he said, "are you come down to canvass for Miss Herbert? Is she your relation or sister? Good heavens! what are you here for?"

"Oh, do not be angry!"

"Angry! angry with you! the one in the whole world——"

"Stop, you do not know what you are saying!"

"Miss Herbert—Annie! what do you mean?"

"It is I—I myself, who am the female candidate."

Somers dropped her hand and walked off to the window, in a vain effort to conceal the weight of the blow.

"Did you not know? Could you not guess?" began poor Annie.

"Know! guess!" cried he. "Not I—I have been too great a fool! trusted too blindly, been too easy a dupe! Ah, forgive me; I have no right to speak like this."

His tone had become so formal and stiff that Annie felt as if her heart was breaking.

"Why—why did you change your name?" she cried.

"Ah, then, you did not know! You were not really deceiving me? trying to get an unfair start of me?"

"Deceive you!"

Annie drew up haughtily.

"I don't know," he said, bitterly; "women have different ways of looking at these things from men; stratagem is more in their line."

"It is not true!" cried Annie, passionately.

"Then why," he cried, almost angrily in his pain—"why did you make me love you? why not have warned me in time, have told me the truth of your holding these miserable opinions that make women make fools of themselves every year?"

"You have no right to speak to me like this!"

"I have a right! If you share our privileges you incur the penalty of being spoken to as equals. My goddess comes down from her pedestal and becomes one of us, and shall be treated accordingly. No longer my mistress, but my opponent."

"Go, Captain Somers! I will not bear this!"

"I will go; but I will not abate one jot of my opposition. I will fight the seat to the utmost of my power. I give you fair warning. You doubtless consider that it is insulting that I should do so, on the old-fashioned theory that hand-to-hand opposition to a woman is unworthy of a man. Our respective agents show an animosity to each other which I have tried to put a check on. I shall withdraw the check; for when a woman ceases to be womanly, a man must in self-defence treat her as a man."

"You are cruel."

"I have done."

Annie started forward as he left the room, and then throwing herself on the sofa, buried her face in the cushions, and cried as if her heart would break. She thought he was gone, but the sound of her sobs made him leap from his horse and return. In a moment he was kneeling by her side.

"Oh, Annie, forgive me! I did not mean it; what shall I do? Annie, look up, my own, my dearest! What a brute I have been!"

"Please go!" she cried, trying to wrench her hand from him.

"Not till you say you have forgiven me—not till you are calm again."

"But don't be so angry," she sobbed.

"Don't you see it is only because I love you so? Oh, can't you give it all up? Can't you see what intense humbug it all is? You are only fitted to be my own little wife, to be taken care of, and loved and adored. Can't you see it?"

"Oh, no, no!" but unconsciously her head was on his shoulder and he was wiping away her tears.

"Give it up, dearest," he said—"give it up for my sake, and let us be happy."

"How can I? I am pledged."

"Confound it all! What could have put such ridiculous trash into your head?"

"All—all my life—Rhoda——"

"Throw her over!"

Annie drew back from him, but looked meekly and deprecatingly in his face.

"Annie, don't you see this parts us for ever if you carry it on? Can you not withdraw? Plead illness, any lie."

"It would be dishonourable."

"Good heavens!"

"There is only one chance!" cried Annie. "Oh, Captain Somers, please, please, please canvass well! You do not know how dreadfully successful we are, how close it will be. Do, if you care for me at all—please, beat me now!"

"My poor little darling!"

"If you knew how I dread success."

"And you shall not be successful if I can help it!" he cried, jumping up. "Good-bye, darling! What? what do you say? I can't hear."

"Please," she whispered, "don't go near the town-hall to-night."

"All right," he answered, and left her with a perfect storm of conflicting emotions in his breast; but with a fixed determination to carry the seat *coûte que coûte.*

CHAPTER IX.

IT was eight o'clock. The town-hall was densely crowded with both men and women, when the female candidate and Rhoda Langdon appeared upon the platform. Rhoda looked flushed and handsome, and threw a glance of self-confidence at her supporters. Annie, with a beating heart, could see only the swaying mass of people, and hear their loud greetings, as if in a terrible nightmare. The moment was come that she had dreaded so much. Rhoda was the first to speak. All nervousness left her when she stood before her audience, and a moment of extreme fluency came upon her as she explained her views and the supposed opinions of her cousin, in language which, if rather too flowery, was fluent and grammatical. She was much applauded, and allowed to speak almost without interruption, a few vehement cries of "No, no!" being hissed down at once.

At last the moment came, and Annie stood before the crowd. The colour rushed to her cheeks, burning with the sense that hundreds of eyes were fixed upon her. Her eyes were bent on the ground; some of her fair hair had become loose, and a large soft curl of it fell on her breast. Shouts of applause greeted her,

and seemed as if they never would cease. At last silence was restored, and Annie began to speak.

Men spoke of her afterwards with tears in their eyes, such was the power she exercised. And yet it was a speech which made her keen supporters on the platform twist and fidget, and even grind their teeth with vexation. She threw herself on the mercy of her audience; she pleaded with them that it was possible to try and do good to their country, to be ambitious and anxious to avail herself of talents granted, and yet with it all to be womanly. A few people cried "Politics, politics!" and then she seemed to falter a little, but recovered herself, confessing that she knew but little of politics, but that she would always do what they wished,—which was received with some laughter but much applause; and it ended much too soon. Annie had not spoken ten minutes, but she thought it was an hour.

"This must have ruined our cause," said Scoton, in a low tone of extreme vexation, to Rhoda.

"It is uncommonly popular," said a red-faced young lawyer, who was one of the committee. Rhoda could not speak; she felt mortified and angry with herself for compelling one so unfit as Annie was to stand; but the poor child came to her so white and trembling that she could only make the best of it, and try to encourage her.

When they left the town-hall, they were escorted home in their fly by large numbers shouting and hallooing, to Annie's terror and distress.

Eagerly the next day they scanned the report of the speeches in the local paper. Annie was much disturbed at the shortness and want of consecutiveness of hers, and rather astonished at the praise it received; undeveloped political capacity—very great promise — the genuine modesty of a high-class intellect,—every possible compliment was lavished upon it. Rhoda's also received its share of praise, and to her great satisfaction it read better even than it sounded; and various little mistakes and errors in the wording, of which she had been conscious at the time, had got themselves into order under the able pen of the sympathising reporter. The Conservative paper came out later in the day, and was looked at with even more anxiety. Again Annie found herself praised, but in a way which made Rhoda bite her lips and stamp about the room.

Her own speech was the first reported and commented on. "It was admirable," wrote the critic. "A more fluent flow of diluted twaddle has not been heard in this town-hall within the memory of man; every substantive possessing a womanly assortment of innumerable adjectives—every sentence containing at least one parenthesis. Three perorations, and one passionate personal appeal. The political part of the speech was in much the same strain as one hears everywhere nowadays—bombastic assertions of the strength of woman, powers of endurance, concentration, etc., etc.—as if any reasonable man could doubt their powers of endurance! From Miss Langdon we had expected more, perhaps—some originality of

thought and design; but this friend of our interesting opponent, finding nothing new to say, could only fall back on the old-fashioned woman's rights—gave us a passionate, retrospective sketch of all that has been done since the first grant of female suffrage,—a vehement appeal to us not to stop in the course we are running, but to emancipate all our domestic slaves—to elevate them from their lower sphere—to take upon ourselves, being of more earthly and gross material, the menial offices which are dragging down from its intellectual height the 'lofty, high, noble aspiring female nature,'—and so on *ad infinitum*. We turn with a sense of freshness and pleasure to the infinitely silly speech of our female candidate. Such strong language is incompatible with pale cheeks and frightened blue eyes; and the applause was too much even for this powerful specimen of our future rulers; for she was observed to tremble very much, and even to catch at the gown which, notwithstanding the feminality of so doing, Miss Langdon still wears. And when at length the female candidate was seen to speak, though the silence was exceptional, no one could hear a word. At last, when the words became audible, they proved to be of a most tender pleading nature:—'Electors of Loughtonstone! by all means return your female candidate; she has pledged herself to obey your wishes and forward every measure every one of you shall desire to have forwarded.' We will push comment no further—we will be generous; for this formidable antagonist, this matured Radical, we learn, is that creature of all others to be treated with

tenderness and consideration,—an artless, motherless girl!"

"This is the worst of all!" cried Rhoda, scarlet with indignation. "They could not have contrived to insult us more. I wish I was in the town-hall at this moment. Oh, Annie, after all we have done together, it is so hard that you remain just the same!"

"I cannot help it," said Annie, ruefully.

"No—I suppose some people were made so; but if it had only been my own cause I was pleading!"

"Ah, Rhoda! if you only would have consented to do it instead of me."

"Yes, I see it now," she said, sadly. "But how could I, without any money of my own? and I thought it such a privilege to stand that it would have been impossible for me to have done it instead of you; but I am sorry I did not yield now."

"It was too generous of you, dear," said Annie, tenderly; "for you know well enough that my money is just as much yours as mine. Do you honestly think that we shall win?"

"I don't know—I can't say," answered Rhoda, springing up; "but we must do our best, and not waste time."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I am going down to Pie Corner to have one more trial at old Watkins."

"Shall I come with you?"

"If you like, but don't overtire yourself."

Just as the cousins prepared for their walk, a ring at the bell announced a visitor; and the maid came

up with a message to say that Mrs. Brand, of the Castle Lodge, would be glad to speak to the ladies.

She was invited into the sitting-room, and the cousins went down. Mrs. Brand rose and curtseyed as they came in; she had a small parcel in her hand; but as she was about to speak, she stopped suddenly, and exclaimed—

"Bless my stars, miss, but ye're looking ill!" A pang of terror crossed Rhoda's heart, as she glanced at Annie, and saw her little face looking so pale and thin, and large eyes quite hollow from over-fatigue.

"I am quite well, thanks, Mrs. Brand, only rather tired; I am so glad that you have come to see us."

"Well, miss, I *did* make so bold, and that's the truth; but you were so kind that day, that I couldn't bear to think as you could get into trouble, and all along of me."

"Into trouble? please explain."

"Well, miss, do you mind that there bottle of cod-liver oil as you sent my Sairy Anne, and a deal of good it's done her it has, and a deal more it would have done her if I'd ha' let her drink it up; but, says I, no one as has done me a kindness shall repent it."

"I am glad it has done her good," said Annie.

"And here it is, miss, and sorry I am that ever she took a drop of it. 'Twas only yesterday, you see, miss, and I was doing a bit o' washing, not regular-like, but a bit of Miss Amy's nonsense lace things that nothing'll please her but I'll wash 'em for her, for, says she, nobody washes 'em like you; which it is natural,

for they don't take the pains to pin them out, which it takes a light hand, and none of your wringing of 'em dry. I was like here with my tub, and Sairy Anne she was sewing in the corner, when the Colonel he comes in to speak with me, and me with my sleeves turned up, and a apron on which I'd not have worn to be seen in. Says he, 'Mrs. Brand, that there child looks better.' 'She do, sir,' says I; 'and it be all along of that cod-liver oil as the Female Candlegate gave me.' 'Ha!' says somebody outside, and I ups and sees Mr. Jones a-standing on my white step a-writing something in a little book. 'Come, come. Jones,' says the Colonel, and them's his very words— 'that's rather hard lines.' 'Not it, Colonel,' says he, and never so much as scrapes his shoes. 'It's as pretty a piece of bribery and corruption as I've known.' 'That being the case,' says I, 'I will take back the bottle at once, for them two ladies were as good to me as if they'd known me all my life, and they shan't get into trouble along o' me;' and I ups and takes down the bottle then and there; and the Colonel says, 'That's right, Mrs. Brand;' but Mr. Jones he only laughed."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brand," cried Rhoda, "you may have done us great service."

"Not at all, miss; and I'm sure if it is corruption it has done my child a sight of good, and very much obliged I am."

"We shall scarcely escape, Annie," said Rhoda; "the regulations about bribery are so stringent now that one cannot be too careful."

"Nice, kind woman," said Annie. "How hot and flurried she seemed! But do you really think it was of consequence?"

"It might have unseated you," answered Rhoda, solemnly.

CHAPTER X.

IT was evening when the brougham drove up to the door of Greydon Castle, and all its inhabitants rushed from the dining-room into the hall to receive a new arrival from the station. The Colonel, still waving his dinner-napkin, could not contain his pleasure.

"My dear Burnley, this is too good of you; and how are you, old fellow? Come in at once; we had just sat down to dinner."

"How are you, dear old boy?" from Captain Somers.

"Better, better, thanks; don't let me keep you from your dinner. Somers, you look fagged; I have a hundred questions to ask. How do you do, Alice? —Amy, I think you have grown."

"In six months?" laughed Amy.

The soup and fish were removed before the all-important question was asked.

"Well, Somers, and how go the chances?"

The Colonel's brow grew black, Somers's white. One of the girls volunteered a slight hint to her old friend under the table, which he obstinately would not take.

"Come, tell me all about it. What is the formidable antagonist like?"

"You know Miss Annie Herbert?" said the Colonel, shortly.

"Whew!" Burnley's face expressed his extreme astonishment. "And how about the birds this year?" he said, dexterously changing the subject.

"Capital! large and strong, and heaps of them!"

"That's all right."

Somehow the conversation flagged till the three men were alone in the smoking-room, when Somers said, with a would-be lightness of tone—

"My father refuses to believe in my description of Miss Herbert, Burnley."

"A girl who allows herself to be put in such a position must either be brazen-faced or a fool."

"She is only a child," said Burnley.

"Only a child! But what sort of a child? So practised in the arts of conquest that there is scarcely a man or a fool whom she has canvassed who is not mad about her. Child, indeed!"

"Really!"

"She is irresistible, it seems. Even Hugh is a fool about her. I always thought it was the dark one who was the candidate; but it turns out that this helpless-looking school-girl is the more artful of the two."

"Bless my soul, Greydon! she is the most artless, ill-instructed, sweetest, and prettiest little bit of humanity I ever came across."

"So she has made a fool of you also."

"Indeed she has; but I certainly had no expectation of finding her poaching on your manors, John. What day is fixed for the poll?"

"Actually to-morrow."

"By Jove! I am only just in time. What shall you do if your borough returns a female member, Greydon?" he said, mischievously.

The Colonel growled ominously.

"Poor child!" continued Burnley; "I am uncommonly sorry. Of course, it is all done by that silly, ambitious woman. She must have found out the bitterness of it by this time. Have you read the poor child's speech, Greydon?"

"Not I."

"But you should have done so. It would have had double interest for me if I had known that it was my dear little friend uttering all that nonsense. No wonder it was silly!"

"She is trading on her irresistible beauty!"

"She is certainly lovely. One of those sweet womanly faces that always appear to be pleading for forbearance. That woman had no right to bring her forward. I should as soon have expected to see one of your own girls addressing a constituency, Greydon. Besides, the poor child has no mother."

As Somers went up to bed, he grasped his friend's hand, and whispered, rather huskily:

"Thanks, old fellow."

The great day came at last. Seven o'clock in the evening was said to be the time fixed for the declaration of the poll.

What a long day of extreme anxiety it seemed! Amy and Alice could settle to nothing. The few words and occasional glimpses of their brother or any of his fellow-workers were received with thankfulness. In vain the Colonel boasted of his certainty; he was as pale with anxiety as any of the others, and was always flitting nervously in and out of the windows. He refused to go to the town at all. At one o'clock a note was put into his hand from his son. "Do not expect me; matters looking very serious." And the whole party felt as if this was becoming unendurable. Before long Burnley was obliged to lie down in a darkened room, being threatened by one of his attacks of pain; but he would only consent to do so on condition of a promise that every note or message should be brought to him at once.

Two o'clock luncheon was prepared, and they all made a pretence of eating; but it was taken away almost untouched. The very dogs had an air of uneasiness, and started and barked on the slightest provocation.

At half-past three, Captain Somers's groom came up with a brief note. "The voters coming up very slowly; a little more hopeful." Then the old Colonel took his hat and cane, and walked off to the town.

From one polling-place to another Annie Herbert and Rhoda went with Mr. Scoton and one or two others, and wherever they went were followed by a noisy shouting crowd. As the day passed on, Rhoda grew frightened at Annie's white face.

"You will never be able to go on unless you have some rest," she said at last. "I shall take you home and come back myself."

"But I do not like to leave you, Rhoda."

"Never mind," said her cousin, authoritatively. "Remember you will have to speak afterwards, and must be prepared. Let us go at once."

They were, however, delayed for half an hour by a message from Scoton, and obliged to hurry off to another polling-place. Then Rhoda drew Annie's arm through hers determinately, and walked off with her to Pineapple Cottage. Unfortunately, as they passed, the crowd gathered round them unpleasantly, shouting loudly, and seemed determined to follow them. It was a very hot day in September, and Annie had to summon all her resolution to enable her to get on. The crowd increased as they drew near home; and they could see numbers of persons standing round their door in the distance. Even Rhoda was dismayed.

"I wish we had not left the gentlemen," she said, nervously.

Colonel Greydon, coming down the road, saw the two frightened and tired faces in the midst of their tormentors. Painful doubts seized on him as to what he should do—the little face of the female candidate looked so pale and forlorn; but the other looked plucky enough. There was some way yet to reach their house, he saw, and the road was lined with people.

At this moment a man considerably the worse for

good cheer reeled up to Annie, and trying to chuck her under the chin, shouted out, "I'll vote for you. There! hang me if I don't!" Here the Colonel broke through the crowd and pushed him aside. He offered Annie his arm, with his head averted.

"Do you want to get home, madam?" he said, grimly, to Rhoda.

"Thank you. I wished my cousin to get home; but I am afraid it will be difficult," she answered, not knowing who her helper could be. "I do not know a single quiet place where I can place her."

"Take her into Greydon Forest; no one will venture there."

"But I have no permission."

"Never mind, I give you permission; nobody will interfere with you."

"A thousand thanks," said Rhoda, wonderingly; but he was hurrying them through the crowd, who fell back respectfully when they saw him.

He took them through the gates, turned sharply off to the right, and after about two minutes' walk in the delicious, cool wood, showed them an open space with a rustic seat under a tree.

"I am so much obliged to you," said Annie; and the Colonel, lifting his hat, walked away.

"This is a comfort," said Rhoda. "You will get quite recruited here, darling; look, lean back, or sit on this beautiful green turf, and lean against the tree."

"Rhoda, must you go?"

"Not just yet. Are you very tired, dear?"

"Dreadfully tired, and I feel so odd."

"Lean back on my shoulder; it is only the heat; perhaps you might even go to sleep. Annie! Annie!"

Annie had fainted away.

Rhoda laid her gently on the grass in terror, fanned her and called to her to no purpose; then suddenly remembering that the lodge-gate was not far off, rushed off for a glass of water.

It so happened that Colonel Greydon, after walking away a few steps, could not resist the looks of the female candidate; and much ashamed of himself, walked back, went into the open window of his own dining-room, secured a glass of sherry, and returned to the spot where he had left his son's opponents. A curious sight met his eyes. The sun was glinting down through thick foliage, the green moss was like emerald velvet, the white stems of the great beech-trees glimmering in the checkered light, and on the ground lay the very wood-nymph fitted to inhabit these glades; her hat had fallen off, and she lay flat on the ground, her hands unclosed beside her, her fair hair loosened by the fall, and straying unheeded over the lovely face, as still and pale as marble.

In a moment the old Colonel was on his knees; she was raised in his arms, the wine pressed to her lips—but still she did not move; he forced a few drops through her lips.

When Rhoda came back with the water, followed by Mrs. Brand, she was too much frightened even to be astonished. The Colonel seized it from her, soak-

ing his handkerchief and dashing it plentifully over her face and hands—her pretty white gown was soaked with it.

At last there came a little shudder, and she opened her eyes and sighed—

"Rhoda!"

"I am here, dear, look up! You are better."

"Where are we?"

"In the wood, out of doors; can you sit up?"

Colonel Greydon drew back, and Annie raised herself up; she saw him suddenly, and said——

"I beg your pardon."

"No, no, my dear; you keep quite still, and when you are better we will go."

"Thanks," and Annie shut her eyes again in bewilderment.

"We must take her to the Castle," said Colonel Greydon to Rhoda, "as soon as she can walk."

"We are almost as near home," said she, doubtfully.

"But at home she will be subject to all the row and noise this business has brought upon you; it is no use taking her there."

"Thank you, it is quite true; Annie, try and drink this wine—that's right, now keep still again. Are you sure you do not mind having her at the Castle?" she asked, meekly.

"Are you better now, Miss Herbert?" said the Colonel, cheerily, giving Rhoda no answer.

"Yes, I am well now, thanks—Rhoda, I can go now."

They helped her to rise to her feet, when, a little to Rhoda's discomfiture, the Colonel signed to Mrs. Brand to put her arm round her on one side, and drew her hand through his arm on the other.

"I will take her home, madam," he said; "and I hope you will trust her to me, for I am sure you must be anxious to return to the battle."

Rhoda was very anxious to return; but she did not like to be disposed of with so little ceremony, so she stopped to speak to Annie—

"Tell me, dear, shall you be able to get on? only say whether you mind my going, and nothing will make me leave you."

In answer, Annie looked up into the somewhat anxious face of the old Colonel with such a look of trustfulness and confidence, that he involuntarily smiled with pleasure.

"Thank you, Rhoda; I would rather that you went."

The Colonel and Mrs. Brand, between them, led Annie to the Castle, and Rhoda returned breathless with speed to the town.

All the afternoon Annie lay on the drawing-room sofa, feeling still very odd and faint; and wondering whether what she saw was only a dream, or whether she really was lying on chintz cushions, with a red velvet table near her covered with tea, and bread and butter, and two pretty girls sitting by it; and, strangest of all, the familiar face of Burnley leaning back in a deep, low arm-chair. Nobody actually spoke to her, but they were talking eagerly to them-

selves, and now and then the butler came in with a mysterious face, and said something in a low voice.

"Give me a cup of tea, girls," said a cheery voice, as the Colonel stepped into the room from outside.

"Can you possibly drink it, papa," said Amy, pouring it out, "at this supreme moment?"

"It is past seven," he answered, looking at his watch.

"Seven! Is it seven?" cried Annie, starting up and pushing back her chair.

"Yes, my dear; but lie down again," said the old Colonel, patting her gently. "There is no news yet."

"But how soon? when will it come?" she panted.

"I don't know. We must be patient. Ha! there is the groom! Here, Richard, here! what news? make haste!"

The whole party rushed together to the window; Annie tried to rise, but only staggered back to the sofa. Colonel Greydon's voice read out the news—Somers, 680; Herbert, 510. The room seemed to reel round, to be twisting and turning; she was conscious of people round her, of being held in kind arms, and supported; and then once more all became a blank.

* * * *

For about a week Annie Herbert was too unwell to leave her room; but everything that the most affectionate care could do for her was done: Amy and Alice spent hours by her bedside, cheering her overstrained spirits and amusing her. It was with an effort that the poor child made up her mind to leave

her room: the thought of facing the whole family was terrible to her—and especially without Rhoda; for her cousin, with great good taste, had seen what a restraint her presence was to the family; and knowing that Annie's illness was not serious, and that she was in good hands, she left her, and returned to London two days after the election. In the bitterness of defeat, she foretold what the end would be.

At last Annie came downstairs, and had she been a child of the house, she could not have been received more warmly; the old Colonel was attentive to her in especial—the girls could not make enough of her.

She was lying on the sofa one day by the open window, when she perceived Colonel Greydon and Captain Somers walking together in the forest. At the window they parted, and Captain Somers came in alone.

He came and knelt beside her, and took both her hands and said—

"Annie, my father consents; and you are to be my little wife after all."

A few days' post brought a letter from Rhoda, which Annie brought down, half laughing, half crying, to read. Rhoda had pledged herself to stand for Kingtonville, a small town, whose newly-elected Radical member had been unseated for bribery—and all the world pronounced her to be certain of success.

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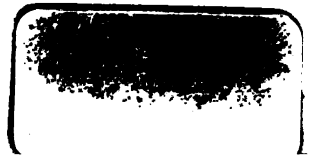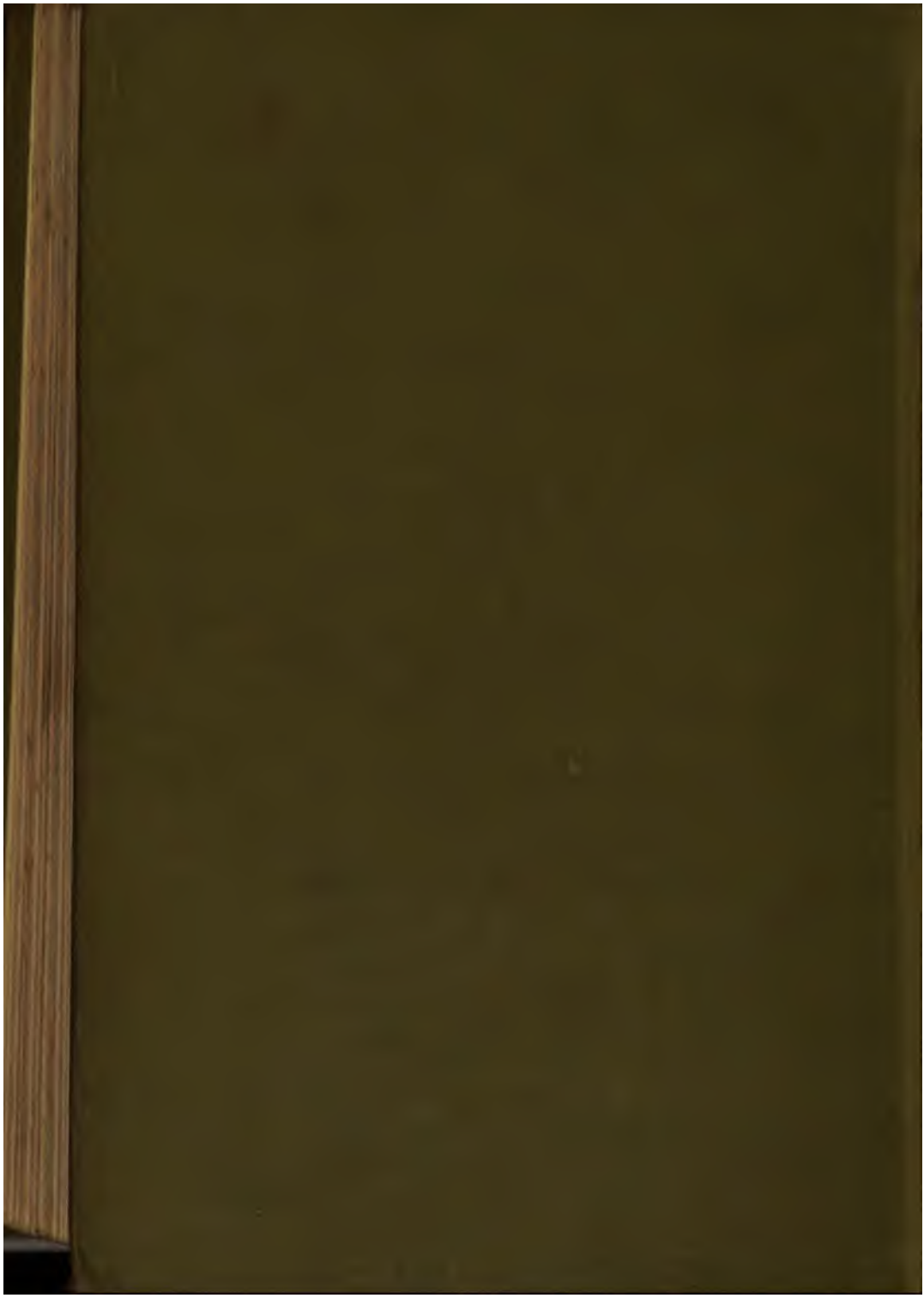
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